

STAR  
WARS™



# STAR WARS™

## Boba Fett Omnibus

Terry Bisson  
Elizabeth Hand



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Boba Fett: Fight to Survive  
Boba Fett: Crossfire  
Boba Fett: Maze of Deception  
Boba Fett: Hunted  
Boba Fett: A New Threat  
Boba Fett: Pursuit  
[www.starwars.com](http://www.starwars.com)

\*\*\*\*\**Fan Printing - Not Officially Published*\*\*\*\*\*

This book is not to be sold or distributed!

## **Includes**

**Boba Fett: Fight to Survive**

**Boba Fett: Crossfire**

**Boba Fett: Maze of Deception**

**Boba Fett: Hunted**

**Boba Fett: A New Threat**

**Boba Fett: Pursuit**

## STAR WARS Timeline



### DAWN OF THE JEDI 25,793 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

**25,793** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
Dawn of the Jedi  
*Dawn of the Jedi*  
Volume One: Force Storm  
Volume Two: Prisoner of Bogan  
Volume Three: Force War



### THE OLD REPUBLIC 5,000-1,000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

**5,000** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Tales of the Jedi*  
The Golden Age of the Sith  
The Fall of the Sith Empire  
Crosscurrent

**4,000** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Tales of the Jedi*  
Knights of the Old Republic  
The Freedon Nadd Uprising  
Dark Lords of the Sith  
The Sith War  
Redemption

**3,964** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Knights of the Old Republic*  
Volume One: Commencement  
Volume Two: Flashpoint  
Volume Three: Days of Fear, Nights of Anger  
Volume Four: Daze of Hate, Knights of Suffering  
Volume Five: Vector  
Volume Six: Vindication  
Volume Seven: Dueling Ambitions  
Volume Eight: Destroyer  
Volume Nine: Demon  
War

**3,956** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
**KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC**  
*The Old Republic*  
Revan

**3,951** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
**KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC II: THE SITH LORDS**

**3,678** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*The Old Republic*  
Volume Two: Blood of the Empire

**3,653** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*The Old Republic*  
Deceived  
Volume One: The Threat of Peace

**3,645** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*The Old Republic*  
Red Harvest  
*The Old Republic*  
Fatal Alliance  
Volume Three: The Lost Suns  
Annihilation

#### THE OLD REPUBLIC

**3,638** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
**THE OLD REPUBLIC: SHADOW OF REVAN**

#### THE OLD REPUBLIC: KNIGHTS OF THE FALLEN EMPIRE

**3,630** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
**THE OLD REPUBLIC: KNIGHTS OF THE ETERNAL THRONE**

**2,974** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Lost Tribe of the Sith*  
Spiral

**1,032** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Knight Errant*  
Volume One: Aflame  
Knight Errant  
Volume Two: Deluge  
Volume Three: Escape

**1,000** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Darth Bane*  
Path of Destruction  
Jedi vs. Sith  
*Darth Bane*  
Rule of Two  
Dynasty of Evil



### RISE OF THE SITH 1,000-22 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

**67** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
Darth Plagueis

**53** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
Jedi - The Dark Side

**44** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Jedi Apprentice*  
The Rising Force  
The Dark Rival  
The Hidden Past  
The Mark of the Crown  
The Defenders of the Dead  
The Uncertain Path  
The Captive Temple  
The Day of Reckoning  
The Fight for Truth  
The Shattered Peace  
Special Edition: Deceptions

**43** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Jedi Apprentice*  
The Deadly Hunter  
The Evil Experiment  
The Dangerous Rescue

**41** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Jedi Apprentice*  
The Ties that Bind  
The Death of Hope  
The Call to Vengeance  
The Only Witness  
The Threat Within

**38** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan*  
The Aurorient Express  
The Last Stand on Ord Mantell

**33** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
Jedi Council - Acts of War  
Maul: Lockdown

**32** YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope  
*Republic*  
Volume One: Prelude to Rebellion  
Darth Maul  
*Episode I Adventures*  
Search for the Lost Jedi  
The Bartokk Assassins  
The Fury of Darth Maul  
Jedi Emergency  
The Ghostling Children  
The Hunt for Anakin Skywalker  
Capture Arawynne  
Trouble on Tatooine  
Rescue in the Core  
Festival of Warriors  
Pirates from Beyond the Sea  
The Bongo Rally  
Cloak of Deception  
Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter

#### EPISODE I: THE PHANTOM MENACE

## **BOUNTY HUNTER**

Jango Fett - Open Seasons  
*Republic*  
Volume Two: Outlander  
Volume Three: Emissaries to Malastare  
Volume Four: Twilight  
Infinity's End

**30** *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*  
*Republic*  
Volume Five: The Hunt for Aurra Sing  
Volume Six: Darkness  
Volume Seven: The Stark Hyperspace War  
Volume Eight: Rite of Passage

**29** *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*  
Rogue Planet

**28** *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*  
*Jedi Quest*  
Path to Truth  
*Jedi Quest*

**27** *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*  
Outbound Flight  
*Jedi Quest*  
The Way of the Apprentice  
The Trail of the Jedi  
The Dangerous Games

**25** *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*  
*Jedi Quest*  
The Master of Disguise  
The School of Fear  
The Shadow Trap  
The Moment of Truth

**24** *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*  
*Jedi Quest*  
The Changing of the Guard  
The False Peace  
Starfighter: Crossbones  
*Republic*  
Volume Nine: Honor and Duty

**23** *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*  
*Jedi Quest*  
The Final Showdown  
*Star Wars Adventures*  
Hunt the Sun Runner  
The Cavern of Screaming Skulls  
The Hostage Princess  
Jango Fett vs. the Razor Eaters  
The Shape-Shifter Strikes  
The Warlords of Balmorra

**22** *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*  
**JEDI STARFIGHTER**

The Approaching Storm  
Blood Ties: A Tale of Jango & Boba Fett

**EPISODE II: ATTACK OF THE CLONES**

**REPUBLIC COMMANDO**

**THE CLONE WARS**  
**(VIDEO GAME)**

Boba Fett  
The Fight to Survive  
Crossfire

*Clone Wars*  
Volume One: The Defense of Kamino

Boba Fett  
Maze of Deception  
Hunted

*Clone Wars*  
Volume Two: Victories and Sacrifices

*Republic Commando*  
Hard Contact

**CLONE WARS:**  
**VOLUME ONE**

SkyeWalkers

*Clone Wars*  
Volume Four: Light and Dark  
The Cestus Deception  
Jedi Trial

*Clone Wars*  
Volume Three: Last Stand on Jabim  
Volume Five: The Best Blades  
Volume Six: On the Fields of Battle

**THE CLONE WARS:**  
**THE MOVIE**

**THE CLONE WARS:**  
**SEASON ONE**

*The Clone Wars: Secret Missions*  
Breakout Squad  
Curse of the Black Hole Pirates  
Duel at Shattered Rock  
Guardians of the Chiss Key

*The Clone Wars*  
Volume One: Shipyards of Doom  
Wild Space  
No Prisoners  
Volume Two: Crash Course

**THE CLONE WARS:**  
**REPUBLIC HEROES**

*The Clone Wars*  
The Colossus of Destiny  
Hero of the Confederacy

Shatterpoint  
*Republic Commando*  
Triple Zero

**21** *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*  
**THE CLONE WARS:**  
**SEASON TWO**

*The Clone Wars Gambit*  
Stealth  
Siege

*The Clone Wars*  
The Wind Raiders of Talorann  
*Republic Commando*  
True Colors

Medstar  
Battle Surgeons  
Jedi Healer

**THE CLONE WARS:**  
**SEASON THREE**

*The Clone Wars*  
Deadly Hands of Shon-Ju  
Strange Allies  
The Starcrusher Trap

**THE CLONE WARS:**  
**SEASON FOUR**

*The Clone Wars*  
The Smuggler's Code  
The Sith Hunters  
Defenders of the Lost Temple

**THE CLONE WARS:**  
**SEASON FIVE**

**20** *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*  
General Grievous

**THE CLONE WARS:**  
**SEASON SIX**

*Clone Wars*  
Volume Eight: The Last Siege, the Final Truth  
Volume Seven: When They Were Brothers

Boba Fett  
A New Threat  
Pursuit

**19** *YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope*  
Yoda: Dark Rendezvous

**CLONE WARS:**  
**VOLUME TWO**

Labyrinth of Evil

**EPISODE III: REVENGE OF THE SITH**

*Republic Commando*  
Order 66

*Republic*  
Volume Nine: Endgame

Kenobi

Purge

Dark Lord: The Rise of Darth Vader

*Dark Times*

Volume One: The Path to Nowhere

*Darth Vader*

Darth Vader & The Lost Command

Imperial Commando: 501st

*Dark Times*

Volume Two: Parallels

Volume Three: Vector

*Coruscant Nights*

Jedi Twilight

*Darth Vader*

Darth Vader & The Ghost Prison

*Dark Times*

Volume Four: Blue Harvest

Volume Five: Out of the Wilderness

Volume Six: Fire Carrier

Volume Seven: A Spark Remains

**18 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Darth Vader*

Darth Vader & The Ninth Assassin

*Last of the Jedi*

The Desperate Mission

Dark Warning

Underworld

Death on Naboo

A Tangled Web

Return of the Dark Side

Secret Weapon

Against the Empire

Master of Deception

Reckoning

*Coruscant Nights*

Streets of Shadow

Patterns of Force

The Last Jedi

**17 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Darth Vader*

Darth Vader & Cry of Shadows

**15 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

**DROIDS**

**10 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

Droids (Marvel)

*The Han Solo Trilogy*

The Paradise Snare

**5 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Droids (Dark Horse)*

Volume One: The Kalarba Adventures

Volume Two: Rebellion

Volume Three: Season of Revolt

*Jabba the Hutt*

The Gaar Suppoon Hit

The Hunger of Princess Nampi

The Dynasty Trap

Betrayal

*The Han Solo Trilogy*

The Hutt Gambit

**4 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*The Lando Calrissian Adventures*

Lando Calrissian & the Mindharp of Sharu

**3 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*The Lando Calrissian Adventures*

Lando Calrissian & the Flamewind of Oseon

*Boba Fett*

Enemy of the Empire

*The Lando Calrissian Adventures*

Lando Calrissian & the Starcave of Thonboka

**THE FORCE UNLEASHED**

*Death Star*

*Agent of the Empire*

Volume One: Iron Eclipse

**2 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Agent of the Empire*

Volume Two: Hard Targets

*The Han Solo Trilogy*

Rebel Dawn

*The Han Solo Adventures*

Han Solo At Star's End

Han Solo's Revenge

Han Solo and the Lost Legacy

*Adventures in Hyperspace*

Fire Ring Race

Shinbone Showdown

**1 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope**

**THE FORCE UNLEASHED II**

*Star Wars Adventures*

Han Solo & The Hollow Moon of Khorya

*Dark Forces*

Soldier for the Empire

*Empire*

Volume One: Betrayal

Death Troopers

Underworld - The Yavin Vassilika

*Empire*

Volume Two: Darklighter

**EMPIRE AT WAR**

**X-WING**

Blood Ties: Boba Fett is Dead

**LETHAL ALLIANCE**

**DARK FORCES**

Shadow Games

The Assassination of Darth Vader



**THE REBELLION**

**0-4 YEARS AFTER**

**STAR WARS: A New Hope**

**0 EPISODE IV:  
A NEW HOPE**

**BATTLEFRONT: RENEGADE  
SQUADRON**

**REBEL ASSAULT**

**ROGUE SQUADRON II:  
ROGUE LEADER**

Tales from the Mos Eisley Cantina

*Empire*

Volume Three: The Imperial Perspective

**ROGUE SQUADRON III:  
REBEL STRIKE**

*Star Wars Missions*

Assault on Yavin 4

Escape from Thyferra

Attack on Delrakkin

Destroy the Liquidator

Scoundrels

*Pizzazz*

The Keeper's World

The Kingdom of Ice

*Star Wars Missions*

Darth Vader's Return

Rogue Squadron to the Rescue

Bounty on Bonodan

Total Destruction



*Rebel Force*  
Target  
Hostage  
Renegade  
Firefight  
Trapped

*Allegiance*

*Rebel Force*  
Uprising

*Empire*  
Volume Three: The Imperial Perspective

*Classic Star Wars*  
Volume One: Doomworld  
Volume Two: Dark Encounters

*Science Adventures*  
Emergency in Escape Pod Four  
Journey Across Planet X

*Star Wars Missions*  
Revolt of the Battle Droids  
Showdown in Mos Eisley  
Bounty Hunters vs. Battle Droids  
The Vactooine Disaster

*Star Wars*  
Volume One: In the Shadow of Yavin  
Volume Two: From the Ruins of Alderaan  
Volume Three: Rebel Girl  
Volume Four: A Shattered Hope

### ROGUE SQUADRON

*Galaxy of Fear*  
Eaten Alive  
City of the Dead  
Planet Plague

*Empire*  
Volume Four: The Heart of the Rebellion  
Volume Five: Allies and Adversaries  
River of Chaos

*Boba Fett*  
Man with a Mission

*Galaxy of Fear*  
Ghost of the Jedi  
Army of Terror

*Empire*  
Volume Six: In the Shadows of their Fathers  
Volume Seven: The Wrong Side of the War

*Galaxy of Fear*  
The Brain Spiders  
The Swarm

Choices of One

*Rebellion*  
Volume One: My Brother, My Enemy  
Volume Two: The Ahakista Gambit  
Volume Three: Small Victories  
Volume Four: Vector

*Boba Fett*  
Overkill

*Galaxy of Fear*  
Spore  
The Doomsday Ship  
Clones

*Star Wars Adventures*  
Chewbacca & the Slavers of the Shadowlands

## 1 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

*Galaxy of Fear*  
The Hunger

### THE STAR WARS HOLIDAY SPECIAL

*Star Wars Missions*  
The Hunt for Han Solo  
The Search for Grubba the Hutt  
Ithorian Invasion  
Togorian Trap

*Empire and Rebellion*  
Honor Among Thieves

*Galaxies: The Ruins of Dantooine*

*Star Wars Missions*  
Prisoner of the Nikto Pirates  
The Monster of Dweem  
Voyage to the Underworld  
Imperial Jailbreak

## 2 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

### STAR WARS: GALAXIES

### TIE FIGHTER

Splinter of the Mind's Eye

*Star Wars Adventures*  
Princess Leia and the Royal Ransom  
Boba Fett and the Ship of Fear

*Epic Collection*  
The Newspaper Strips Volume One  
The Newspaper Strips Volume Two  
*Empire and Rebellion*  
Razor's Edge

## 3 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Rebel Heist

### EPISODE V: THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK

### X-WING ASSAULT

Tales of the Bounty Hunters

*Star Wars Adventures*  
Luke Skywalker & the Treasure of the Dragonsnakes  
The Will of Darth Vader

*Classic Star Wars*  
Volume Three: Resurrection of Evil  
Volume Three: Screams of the Void

### X-WING VS. TIE FIGHTER

### EWOKS SEASON ONE

### EWOKS SEASON TWO

### EWOKS: CARAVAN OF COURAGE

### EWOKS: BATTLE FOR ENDOR

*Classic Star Wars*  
Volume Five: A Fool's Bounty (#68-72)

### SHADOWS OF THE EMPIRE

The Bounty Hunters: Scoundrel's Wages

Battle of the Bounty Hunters

*Classic Star Wars*  
Volume Five: A Fool's Bounty (#73-81)

### REBEL ASSAULT II: THE HIDDEN EMPIRE



## THE NEW REPUBLIC 4-24 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

## 4 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Tales from Jabba's Palace

### EPISODE VI: RETURN OF THE JEDI

Mara Jade: By the Emperor's Hand

*The Bounty Hunter*  
The Mandalorian Armor  
Slave Ship  
Hard Merchandise

The Truce at Bakura

*Classic Star Wars*  
Volume Six: Wookiee World  
Volume Seven: Far, Far Away

Shadows of the Empire: Evolution

X-Wing: Rogue Leader

*X-Wing: Rogue Squadron*  
Volume One: The Rebel Opposition  
Volume Two: The Phantom Affair  
Volume Three: Battleground: Tatooine  
Volume Four: The Warrior Princess  
Volume Five: Requiem for a Rogue  
Volume Six: In the Empire's Service  
Volume Seven: Blood and Honor  
Volume Eight: Masquerade  
Volume Nine: Mandatory Retirement

*Jedi Prince*  
*The Glove of Darth Vader*  
*The Lost City of the Jedi*  
*Zorba the Hutt's Revenge*  
*Mission from Mount Yoda*  
*Queen of the Empire*  
*Prophets of the Dark Side*

**5** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

*Tales from the New Republic*  
*Boba Fett*  
*Twin Engines of Destruction*  
*Luke Skywalker & the Shadows of Mindor*  
*The Heart of the Jedi*

**JEDI KNIGHT: DARK FORCES II**

*Dark Forces*  
*Rebel Agent*  
*Jedi Knight*

**6** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

*X-Wing*  
*Rogue Squadron*

**7** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

*X-Wing*  
*Wedge's Gamble*  
*The Kryptos Trap*  
*The Bacta War*  
*Wrath Squadron*  
*Iron Fist*  
*Solo Command*

**8** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

*The Courtship of Princess Leia*  
*Tatooine Ghost*

**9** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

*Thrawn Trilogy*  
*Heir to the Empire*  
*Dark Force Rising*  
*The Last Command*  
*X-Wing*  
*Isard's Revenge*

**10** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

**JEDI KNIGHT: MYSTERIES OF THE SITH**

*Dark Empire Trilogy*  
*Dark Empire*  
*Dark Empire II*

*Boba Fett*  
*Bounty on Bar-Kooda*  
*When the Fat Lady Swings*  
*Murder Most Foul*

**11** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

*Dark Empire Trilogy*  
*Empire's End*

*Boba Fett*  
*Agent of Doom*

*Crimson Empire*  
*Crimson Empire*

*The Bounty Hunters: Kenix Kil*

*Crimson Empire*  
*Council of Blood*

*Jedi Academy*  
*Jedi Search*  
*Dark Apprentice*  
*Champions of the Force*

*I, Jedi*

**12** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

*Children of the Jedi*

**JEDI KNIGHT II: JEDI OUTCAST**

*Darksaber*

**13** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

*X-Wing*  
*Starfighters of Adumar*  
*Planet of Twilight*

*Jedi Academy*  
*Leviathan*  
*Crimson Empire*  
*Empire Lost*

**14** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

*The Crystal Star*

**JEDI KNIGHT: JEDI ACADEMY**

**16** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

*Black Fleet Crisis*  
*Before the Storm*  
*Shield of Lies*  
*Tyrant's Nest*

**17** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

*The New Rebellion*

**18** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

*Corellian Trilogy*  
*Ambush at Corellia*  
*Assault at Selonia*  
*Showdown at Centerpoint*

**19** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

*Hand of Thrawn*  
*Specter of the Past*  
*Vision of the Future*  
*Union*  
*Scourge*

**22** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

*Junior Jedi Knights*  
*The Golden Globe*  
*Lyric's World*  
*Promises*  
*Anakin's Quest*  
*Vader's Fortress*  
*Kenobi's Blade*  
*Survivor's Quest*

**23** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

*Young Jedi Knights*  
*Hairs of the Force*  
*Shadow Academy*  
*The Lost Ones*  
*Lightsabers*  
*Darkest Knight*  
*Jedi Under Siege*  
*Shards of Alderaan*

**24** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

*Young Jedi Knights*  
*Diversity Alliance*  
*Delusions of Grandeur*  
*Jedi Bounty*  
*The Emperor's Plague*  
*Return to Ord Mantell*  
*Trouble on Cloud City*  
*Crisis on Crystal Reef*



**NEW JEDI ORDER  
 25-36 YEARS AFTER  
 STAR WARS: A New Hope**

**25** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

*New Jedi Order*  
*Vector Prime*

*Invasion*

*Volume One: Refugees*  
*Volume Two: Rescues*  
*Volume Three: Revelations*

*New Jedi Order*

*Dark Tide: Onslaught*  
*Dark Tide: Ruin*  
*Agents of Chaos: Hero's Trial*  
*Agents of Chaos: Jedi Eclipse*

*Chewbacca*

**26** YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: *A New Hope*

*New Jedi Order*  
*Balance Point*  
*Edge of Victory: Conquest*  
*Edge of Victory: Rebirth*

**27 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*New Jedi Order*  
Star by Star  
Dark Journey  
Enemy Lines: Rebel Dream  
Enemy Lines: Rebel Stand  
Traitor

**28 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*New Jedi Order*  
Destiny's Way  
Force Heretic: Remnant  
Force Heretic: Refugee  
Force Heretic: Reunion  
The Final Prophecy

**29 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*New Jedi Order*  
The Unifying Force

**35 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Dark Nest*  
The Joiner King

**36 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Dark Nest*  
The Unseen Queen  
The Swarm War



**LEGACY**

**40-139 YEARS AFTER  
STAR WARS: A New Hope**

**40 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Legacy of the Force*  
Betrayal  
Bloodlines  
Tempest  
Exile  
Sacrifice  
Inferno  
Fury

**41 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Legacy of the Force*  
Revelation  
Invincible  
Crosscurrent  
Riptide

**43 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Millennium Falcon*  
*Fate of the Jedi*  
Outcast  
Omen  
Abyss  
Backlash

**44 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Fate of the Jedi*  
Allies  
Vortex  
Conviction  
Ascension  
Apocalypse  
*X-Wing*  
Mercy Kill

**45 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

Crucible

**137 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Legacy*  
Volume One: Broken  
Volume Two: Shards  
Volume Three: Claws of the Dragon  
Volume Four: Alliance  
Volume Five: The Hidden Temple  
Volume Six: Legacy  
Volume Seven: Storms  
Volume Eight: Tatooine  
Volume Nine: Monster  
Volume Ten: Extremes

**138 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Legacy*  
War

*Legacy II*  
Volume One: Prisoner of the Floating World  
Volume Two: Outcasts of the Broken Ring

**139 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope**

*Legacy II*  
Volume Three: Wanted: Ania Solo  
Volume Four: Empire of One



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# STAR WARS™

## *BOBA FETT*™

THE FIGHT TO SURVIVE

TERRY BISSON







# CHAPTER ONE

Rain.

Some hate it.

Some love it.

Some, like Boba Fett, can hardly remember a time without it.

Supposedly, free water is rare in the galaxy, but you would never know it on his planet. It comes down in sheets, day and night, covering this world, which is all seas except for a few cities on platforms.

The world is called Kamino. The city where Boba and his father live is called Tipoca City.

Lived, rather. For this is the story of how they left, and why, and what happened after that...

You may have heard of Boba Fett's father. He was a bounty hunter. The fiercest, fastest, and most fearless bounty hunter in the galaxy.

Boba Fett was the kid standing in his shadow or by his side. Or usually, both.

When he was lucky, that is. When his dad took him along. Which was almost always. Boba was ten, nearly but not quite old enough to be on his own.

## Terry Bisson

Boba liked going with his father. Seeing new worlds, experiencing the cold thrill of hyperspace, and even getting to try his hand at the controls of his father's small but deadly starship, *Slave I*, from time to time.

A bounty hunter is an outlaw, a tracker—and sometimes a killer—for hire. He doesn't care who his targets are, or who they're running from, or why. He works for the highest bidder, which means the richest and the most ruthless beings in the galaxy. No questions asked.

Being a bounty hunter's son means keeping your mouth shut and your eyes open.

No problem. Boba Fett was proud of his father and proud of what he did.

"I'm a bounty hunter's son," he would say to himself proudly. The reason he said it to himself, and to no one else, was that he had no one else to say it to.

He had no friends.

How can you have friends when you live and travel in secret, sneaking on and off planets, avoiding police and security and the dreaded, nosy, Jedi Knights?

*A bounty hunter must always be ready to go anywhere and face any danger.* That was from Jango Fett's code, the rule by which he lived.

Boba Fett had his own, smaller, more personal code: *A bounty hunter's kid must always be ready to go with him.*

At age ten, Boba had seen more of the galaxy than most grown-ups. What he hadn't seen was the inside of a schoolroom (for he'd never been to school). What he hadn't seen was a mother's smile (for he had no mother). What he hadn't heard was the laughter of a friend (for he had no friends).

Just because he hadn't been to school didn't mean Boba was stupid or ignorant.

## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

There were always books. Books to take on trips; books to read at home on Kamino. He could get all the books he wanted (“Two at a time, only, please!”) from the little library at the foot of his street in Tipoca City.

The library was just a slot in a doorway, but when Boba rang the bell the librarian passed out new books and took back the ones that were due, the ones Boba had read (or given up on, or decided were boring).

The librarian, Whrr, was almost like a friend. A friend Boba had never actually seen.

Boba had no idea what Whrr looked like—or even if he was a person. He was just a voice through a slot in the library door. In fact, Boba figured Whrr could be a droid, since he could hear him whirring and clicking when he was getting books or hologames.

Mostly books.

Whrr didn’t like hologames. “Use your imagination!” he would say. “Find the pictures there! Find the music there!”

Boba agreed. He liked books because the pictures they made in his mind were better than the ones in the hologames.

Boba knew about friends from books.

Lots of books are about friends. Friends having adventures, making discoveries, or just hanging out.

Sometimes Boba pretended to have friends. (Pretending is a form of wishing.)

But his father’s voice was always in his head: “Boba, stay unattached. Remember: *No friends, no enemies. Only allies and adversaries.*”

That saying was from Jango Fett’s code. Boba’s father had lots of sayings, and they were all from his code.

Jango Fett had one friend, though. She was a bounty hunter herself. Her name was Zam Wesell.

Zam could be beautiful but bad. She *liked* to be bad. She sometimes read books about famous outlaws and bloody battles.

## **Terry Bisson**

It was Zam who first mentioned that Boba should read, even though she herself didn't read much. "Want adventure? Read books," Zam said. "Then when you get tired of the excitement, you can close the book. Better than real life."

Boba's father didn't read much. "Books? A waste of time," he said. "Read maps, Boba. Instructions. Warnings. Important stuff."

Boba read all that—but he liked books better. Especially books about droids and starships, stuff he knew he could use someday.

Sometimes Boba thought Zam had told him to read books just because his dad thought it was a waste of time. Zam liked to tease Jango.

Zam was a changeling, a Clawdite. She changed the form of her body back and forth, depending on the situation.

Mothers didn't do that, Boba was pretty sure. He had read about mothers in books, even though he had never met one.

A mother seemed like a nice thing to have.

Once, when he was little, Boba asked his father who his mother was.

"You never had one," said his father. "You are a clone. That means you are my son. Period. No one else, no woman was involved."

Boba nodded. That meant he was exactly like his father, Jango Fett. That meant he was special.

Still, sometimes, in secret, he wished he had a mother.

Boba and his father lived on Kamino because Jango Fett had a job to do there. He was training a special army of super-soldiers for a man named Count Tyranus.

Boba liked to watch the soldiers, lined up in long ranks, marching in the rain. They never got tired and they never complained and they all looked exactly alike—exactly like his father, only younger. Exactly like Boba himself, only older.

## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

“They are also my clones,” Jango Fett told him once when he was little.

It was what Boba had expected to hear. But it still hurt. “Just like me?”

“Not like you,” said Jango Fett. “They are just soldiers. They grow up twice as fast and only live half as long. You are the only true clone. You are my real son.”

“I see,” said Boba. He felt better. Still, he didn’t go watch the clones march anymore. And he didn’t feel quite as special as before.

Tyrannus was an old man with a long, lean face and eyes like a hawk.

Boba had never seen him in person—only on holograms when he gave instructions to Jango Fett, or asked about the progress of the clone army.

Jango called him “Count” and was always polite. But that didn’t mean he liked him, Boba knew.

*Always be polite to a client.* That was part of Jango’s code.

One night Boba heard his father and the Count talking about a new job on a faraway planet.

The Count told Jango Fett that the job would be very dangerous.

That didn’t stop Boba’s father, of course. Later on, Boba wondered if maybe the Count had played up the danger to make sure Jango took the job.

You never knew, with grown-ups.

Jango agreed to do the job. He told the Count he would have to meet up with Zam Wesell and take her along with him.

Boba grinned when he heard that. If they were both going, that meant he might get to go, too.

No such luck.

The next morning, Jango Fett strapped on his battle armor and told Boba that he and Zam were going on a trip.

“Me too?” Boba asked hopefully.

## Terry Bisson

Jango shook his head. “Sorry, son. You’re going to have to stay home alone.”

Boba groaned.

“*A bounty hunter never complains,*” said Jango, in that special voice he reserved for his code. “And neither does his son.”

“But...”

“No buts, son. This is a special job for the Count. Zam and I have to travel fast and light.”

“I’m fast,” Boba said. “And I’m light!”

Jango Fett laughed. “A little too light,” he said, patting Boba on the head. “But big enough to stay here on your own. It will only be a few days.”

The next morning Boba woke up alone in the apartment. Home alone—but not entirely alone.

His father had left him a bowl with five sea-mice in it. And a note: *We’ll be back when these are gone.*

Sea-mice can live in either air or water. They are incredibly cute, with big brown eyes and little paws that turn to flippers when you put them into the water.

They are also incredibly good to eat...if you are a sea eel.

Jango’s pet sea eel lived in a tank in the bedroom.

## CHAPTER TWO

Boba was surprised to find that he liked being home alone.

The apartment was all his. Three squares came out of the cookslot every day, heated to perfection.

Boba could come and go as he liked. He could hang around the spaceport, admiring the sleek fighters and imagining himself at the controls. He could pretend he was a bounty hunter and “track” unsuspecting people on the street. Or, when he grew tired of the endless rain, he could curl up and read on the couch.

It wasn’t even lonely. When Boba was with his father, Jango Fett hardly ever talked. But when Boba was alone he could hear his father’s voice in his head all the time. “Boba do this. Boba do that.”

It was as good as having him actually around.

Better, in fact.

The first two days were easy. And in three more days, Jango and Zam Wesell would be back. How did Boba know?

There were only three sea-mice left. The eel ate one a day. Every morning Boba took a sea-mouse out of the bowl and dropped it into the eel’s tank.

The eel had no name. Just “eel.”

## Terry Bisson

Boba didn't like its narrow eyes and huge mouth. Or the way it swallowed the little sea-mice in one gulp—then digested them slowly, taking all day.

It was creepy.

Jango Fett usually fed the eel. But now it was Boba's job. The note had said it all: *We'll be back when these are gone.*

Boba knew that his dad thought it was important for his son to learn to do what was necessary, even when it was creepy. Even when it was cruel.

*The bounty hunter is free of attachments* was one of his sayings. Another was: *Life feeds on death.*

On the third morning, when Boba woke up and heated his breakfast, there were three sea-mice left.

He decided to spare one. He felt sorry for the sea-mice with their big brown eyes. What if he gave the eel his own breakfast—or, say, half of it?

He could hear his dad's voice in his ear: *Vary your routine. Patterns are traps.* (JFC)

"Okay, Dad," Boba said.

Boba broke his breakfast roll in two and dropped half into the eel's tank. It was gone in an instant.

Then he reached down into the bowl and picked up one of the sea-mice. The sea-mouse made it easy, grabbing Boba's fingers with his tiny paws.

*Maybe he knows I'm not going to feed him to the eel,* Boba thought. But no, each of the others had looked at him in exactly the same way, right before he had dropped them into the eel's tank.

*This one has it right, though,* Boba thought. *I have to make him gone, but I can do it another way. I am going to give him his freedom.*

That was the plan, anyway.

Boba took the sea-mouse into the hall, down the turbolift, and out to the courtyard behind the apartment building.

He set him down in the weed garden. "So long, little sea-mouse," he said. "You're free."



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The sea-mouse looked up at Boba, more terrified than happy. *Maybe he doesn't know what freedom is*, Boba thought. Boba gave him a push with his fingertips, and the tiny creature disappeared into the tall, rain-wet grass. A little wave of movement in the grass showed where he was going.

Then a bigger wave intersected it.

Boba heard a tiny scream—then silence.

## CHAPTER THREE

That afternoon Boba went to the library. It always made him feel better to go to the library.

Well, not always, but often.

He stuck the books he was returning into the slot. The light came on, and Whrr whirred and clicked. “Boba!” he said. “How’re you feeling?”

“Not great,” said Boba. He told Whrr what had happened with the sea-mouse.

“Not great,” agreed Whrr, “but at least you tried. Life is hard on the weak and the small, I guess.”

“What do you mean, you guess?” asked Boba. “Don’t you know?”

“Not really,” said Whrr. “That’s why I stay in here, out of the way.” He whirred his change-the-subject noise. “Ready for some new books? Did you actually finish these?”

“Mostly,” said Boba. “I like to read about navigation and starship flying.”

“You are reading faster,” said Whrr, passing the new books through the slot. “That’s good!”

“Why is that good?”

“You can read more books!”

Boba had to laugh.

## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

“Why are you laughing?” Whrr asked. He sounded a little offended.

“My dad says, if you are a pilot, everything looks like a ship,” said Boba.

“So?”

“So, Whrr, if you had your way, everybody would read books.”

“So? I don’t understand what’s so funny about that,” Whrr said, with a disapproving click.

“Never mind, see ya later!” Boba said, and he took his books and ran.

Time to get rid of another sea-mouse.

Boba woke up determined to try to do the right thing this time. He gave the eel all his breakfast. The eel ate it in one gulp.

There were only two sea-mice left in the bowl. They both looked up at him with their little brown eyes pleading.

“I have to make you gone,” Boba said as he picked one up. “But I’m not going to feed you to the eel. I’m going to set you free for real.”

He locked the apartment door and took the turbolift down to the street. He stuck the sea-mouse inside his shirt so no one could see it.

It seemed to like it there. When Boba pulled it out it was sleeping.

He held it out in the rain as he walked toward the edge of Tipoca City. He wanted to watch its paw turn into a flipper, but it only turned halfway.

*I guess it takes seawater,* Boba thought, heading toward the sound of the waves.

Tipoca City is built on a platform over the sea. Huge waves boom and bang and crash, day and night. Kamino is called the “Planet of Storms.”

Boba hung onto the railing and leaned over the edge of the platform. He looked down, waiting for a lull in the waves.

## Terry Bisson

Finally, there it was—a long green stretch of smooth water. It looked perfect for a little sea-mouse!

“You’re free, little buddy,” Boba said as he dropped the tiny creature into the water. The sea-mouse stared up as it fell, as if it wanted one last look at its benefactor, its protector, the great giant Boba who had rescued it from its bowl....

It hit the water with a little *plunk*.

Then Boba saw a dark shape in the water, and a flash of teeth from below.

And the sea-mouse was gone.

Not even a stain on the water was left.

Boba spent the rest of the day playing hologames and staring out the window into the rain. He was tired of books. He was tired of reading about happy families and kids with friends. And pets.

He was tired of being home alone.

He missed Zam’s jokes (even the dumb ones). He missed his father’s sayings (even the ones he had heard a million times).

The next morning he picked up the last sea-mouse out of the bowl. “Sorry, buddy,” he said as he dropped it into the eel’s tank. “It’s just the way the world works.”

Then he sat down to eat his own breakfast and wait for his father and Zam to get home.

## CHAPTER FOUR

All day Boba was excited, waiting for a certain sound.

Or a bunch of sounds.

Finally, late in the afternoon, there they were: a symphony of little clicks and clacks, all coming from the locks that hung on the apartment door.

Then the door slid open, and there was Jango Fett, looking strong and bold in his Mandalorian battle armor, standing in a puddle of rainwater in the hall.

“Dad!” Boba said. “Where’s Zam?”

“Later,” his father said.

Jango Fett took off his battle armor and laid it out on the floor of the bedroom while Boba watched. He called it “the suit.” He was much smaller without it.

Jango’s face under the helmet was sad and grooved with old scars. The face on his helmet was ruthless and cruel. Boba never wondered which was his father’s “real” face. Both were real to him: the worried father, the fearless warrior.

“Where’s Zam?” Boba asked again.

“Why are you asking all these questions, son?”

“I have a joke to tell her.” He didn’t really, but he figured he could always think of one.

## Terry Bisson

“You’ll have to save it for somebody else.”

Somebody else? There wasn’t anybody else! But Boba knew better than to argue with his father.

“Okay,” he said. He hung his head to hide his disappointment and started to leave the room. He could tell his father wanted to be alone.

“Zam won’t be around anymore,” Jango said.

Boba stopped at the door. “Ever?”

“Ever,” said Jango.

Only the way he said it, it sounded like *never*.

When Jango Fett wasn’t wearing the Mandalorian battle armor, he wore regular clothes. Without the helmet, few recognized him as Jango Fett, the bounty hunter.

The armor was old and scarred, like Jango Fett himself. He always took it off and cleaned it after returning from a job, but he never polished it. He left the scratches alone.

“You don’t want it to shine,” he told Boba as they worked together cleaning the armor later that afternoon. “*Never call attention to yourself.*”

“Yes, sir,” Boba said.

Jango Fett’s face seemed even sadder and older than usual. Boba wondered if it had to do with Zam.

Finally he got up the courage to ask.

“She was about to betray us,” Jango said. “It couldn’t be allowed. There are penalties. She would have done the same if it were me.”

Boba didn’t understand. What was his father trying to tell him? “Did something bad happen to Zam?”

Jango nodded slowly. “Being a bounty hunter means you don’t always make it home. Someday the inevitable will happen. And when it does...”

“What does *inevitable* mean?” Boba asked.

“Inevitable means a sure thing. Death is a sure thing.”

Suddenly Boba got it. “Zam is dead, isn’t she, Dad?”

## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

Jango nodded.

Boba fought back tears. “How—how did it happen?”

“You don’t want to know.”

Boba felt sadness wash over him like a wave. Followed by a colder wave of fear. If it could happen to Zam, could it happen to his father?

Boba didn’t want to think about that. His dad was right: He didn’t want to know.

After he had finished helping his father clean the battle armor and reload the weapons systems, Boba went out and walked all the way down to the end of the street and back.

Zam, dead. No more dumb jokes. No more bright laughter. Boba Fett’s lonely world had just gotten even lonelier.

Kamino is a good planet for feeling sad because it’s always raining. When you’ve been in the rain, nobody can tell you’ve been crying.

When Boba got back to the apartment, he saw that his father had been walking in the rain, too.

*Funny*, thought Boba. *I didn’t see him out there.*

After supper, Jango Fett said, “Boba, listen up.”

Boba listened up.

“What happened to Zam could happen to any of us. To any bounty hunter. Do you understand?”

Boba nodded—but his nod was a lie. He was determined *not* to understand. He had promised himself *not* to think about it. He couldn’t imagine it, anyway. Who or what could get the best of his father in a fight?

“Good,” said Jango Fett. “So, son, I want you to take this.”

Jango handed Boba a book.

Boba was shocked. *My dad?! A book?!*

Jango seemed to know what Boba was thinking. “It’s not a book, son,” he said. “It’s a message unit, from me. For you, when the time comes.”

## Terry Bisson

Not a book? It looked like an ordinary book, about two fingers thick, with a hard cover. It was black, with nothing on the cover. No words, no pictures. Nothing, front or back.

Boba tried to open it but the pages seemed stuck together. He pulled harder on the cover, and his father shook his head.

“Don’t open it,” Jango said. “Because when you open it, your childhood will be over. And it is too soon for that. I want you to have what I never had: a childhood.”

Boba nodded. Though he was confused. Why had his father given him a book if he didn’t want him to open it?

Then his father told him:

“If something happens to me, you should open it. It will tell you what you need to know. Who to ask for. Who to avoid. What to do. What not. Until then, keep it closed, and keep it hidden. Understand, son?”

Boba nodded. He tossed the black book (that was not really a book) into the pile with his library books. He wasn’t going to need it. Ever. No way. Like, something bad was going to happen to his father, the fiercest, fastest, most fearless bounty hunter in the galaxy?

No way. Unthinkable. Which simply meant that Boba was *not* going to think about it.



## CHAPTER FIVE

The next day, Boba and his father went fishing. The rain was light, so they sat on a rock at the edge of the sea. Boba took potshots at rollerfish with his pocker, a laser-aimed spear-thrower. Jango made him turn the laser off and sight by eye.

Boba knew that the fishing trip was his father's way of trying to make him feel better, so he'd forget about Zam's death. Boba did his best to concentrate.

He kept on fishing even when Taun We, one of the Kaminoans, stopped by to talk with Jango. She was tall and white, like a root that has just been pulled out of the ground. Her dark eyes were as big as saucers, her neck long and thin.

Boba usually liked Taun We, but today it was business, business, business. Something about the clones. Boba tried not to listen. He didn't want to hear about the clone army—his ten thousand twin brothers. It made him feel creepy just thinking about it.

He was glad when Taun We left, and to prove it, he speared a few more rollerfish. He tried to act excited to please his dad, but the fun had gone out of it.

Boba couldn't stop thinking about the clones.

He couldn't stop thinking about Zam.

## Terry Bisson

Boba *did* get excited again, though, when they passed the spaceport on their way back to the apartment. There was a new ship on the landing pad. It was a sleek starfighter he had only seen in pictures before.

“Wow!” he said. “It’s a Delta-7!”

“And what of the droid?” Jango asked, pointing to the nav unit behind the cockpit.

“It’s an R4-P,” said Boba excitedly. While his father listened, he listed the starfighter’s features. Extra armaments, extra speed—the Delta-7 with the R4-P was the kind of ship only a few, select pilots could handle.

“Like who?” Jango asked.

“Like you!” Boba said as they hurried home in the rain. He was happy to show off what he had learned from his reading. And even happier to bring a smile to his father’s face.

But the smile didn’t last. Jango seemed thoughtful. Preoccupied. Even worried.

He went into the bedroom to take a nap while Boba sat down with a reference—*Starfighters of the Galaxy*. He was curious to know how such a sleek ship as the Delta-7 had found its way to out-of-the-way Kamino, where nothing important or exciting ever happened.

Boba had barely started to read when he heard the door buzz. He and his father didn’t have any friends, especially with Zam gone, so he was surprised.

It was Taun We again. And this time she wasn’t alone. The man standing next to her wore a simple robe and no jewelry. Under his robe Boba could see the outline of a lightsaber.

A Jedi.

All of a sudden, Boba knew where the starfighter had come from.

Cautiously, he opened the door.

“Boba, is your father here?” Taun We asked.

“Yes.”

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*Say no more than necessary.* That was a favorite saying of Jango Fett. And Boba knew that it especially applied when the Jedi were around.

“May we see him?”

The Jedi said nothing. Just stood there, watching and listening. Cool and collected. But also a little scary.

Boba tried to be cool himself. “Sure,” he said.

*Always be polite. Especially to your enemies.* And the Jedi, as keepers of the peace, were the natural enemies of bounty hunters, who operated outside the law.

Boba stepped back to let them in. The Jedi was looking around as if he had never been in an apartment before. *Nasy!* Boba thought. He decided to ignore him.

“Dad! Taun We’s here!”

Jango Fett came out of the bedroom. He looked at both of the visitors, and he didn’t seem to like what he saw.

“Welcome back, Jango,” Taun We said, pretending she hadn’t just seen him. “Was your trip productive?”

“Fairly.”

Boba listened carefully. Taun We was sounding friendly, as usual. Meanwhile his father was looking the Jedi up and down. To say that Jango didn’t seem to like what he saw would be obvious, like saying Kamino is rainy. It was more than that.

Boba wondered if they had met before. He wondered if the Jedi had anything to do with the death of Zam.

“This is Jedi Master Obi-Wan Kenobi,” Taun We said. “He’s come to check on our progress.”

“That right?” Jango said.

The two men stared at each other. It was like a battle fought without words or weapons.

Boba watched, fascinated. It was obvious to him that his father could have whipped the stupid Jedi with one finger. But something was holding him back.

“Your clones are very impressive,” said the Jedi with a slight bow. “You must be very proud.”

## Terry Bisson

"I'm just a simple man," Jango Fett said, bowing back. "Trying to make my way in the universe."

"Aren't we all?" said the Jedi.

It was like a fight to see who could be most polite!

Meanwhile, the Jedi was looking into the bedroom, where the Mandalorian battle helmet and armor were lying on the floor.

Jango moved in front of the door to block the Jedi's view.

"Ever make your way as far into the interior as Coruscant?" the Jedi asked.

"Once or twice," Jango answered coolly.

"Recently?"

*This is one very nosy Jedi!* Boba thought. He wondered why his father was talking to him at all.

"Possibly," said Jango, and Boba knew from the tone of the answer that his father *had* been to Coruscant.

And the Jedi knew it, too.

Now Boba knew for sure that the Jedi and Jango had encountered each other before, and that the Jedi had had something to do with Zam's death. How he hated the Jedi's smug little smile!

"Then you must know Master Sifo-Dyas," the Jedi said.

"Boba, close the door," said Jango in Huttese, a language they both knew well.

Boba did what his father asked, never taking his eyes off the Jedi. He wanted him to feel his hate.

Meanwhile Jango Fett was fencing. Using words instead of a sword to block the Jedi's moves. "Master who?" he asked.

"Sifo-Dyas. Isn't he the Jedi who hired you for this job?"

"Never heard of him," said Jango.

"Really!?" said the Jedi. For the first time, he looked surprised.

"I was recruited by a man called Tyranus," said Jango. "On one of the moons of Bogden."

"No? I thought..."

Taun We stepped in then. "Sifo-Dyas told us to expect him," she said to the Jedi, pointing to Boba's father. "And he showed

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up just when your Jedi Master said he would. We have kept the Jedi's involvement a secret until your arrival, just as your Master requested."

The Jedi seemed surprised by all this. And trying not to show it. "Curious," he said.

"Do you like your army?" Jango Fett asked. His cold smile seemed to Boba like a sword thrust straight toward the nosy Jedi's heart.

"I look forward to seeing them in action," said the Jedi. A pretty good parry, Boba had to admit.

"They'll do their job well, I'll guarantee that," said Jango.

The Jedi gave up. "Thanks for your time, Jango."

"Always a pleasure to meet a Jedi," said Boba's father with a slight, sarcastic smile.

The door slid shut and the locks began to snap closed. Boba was thrilled. After winning an encounter like that, he figured his father would look pleased, even triumphant. Instead, Jango Fett's face was creased with lines of worry, and he seemed deep in thought.

Boba began to wonder if his father had really won the battle. "What is it, Dad?" he asked.

"Pack your things," Jango said. "We're getting out of here for a while."

## CHAPTER SIX

While Jango Fett put his battle armor on, Boba threw everything the two owned (which wasn't much) into an expandable flight bag.

"Get a move on, Boba!"

Boba knew his father wasn't afraid of anything. But after the encounter with the strange Jedi, Jango seemed nervous. Worried. Not frightened, but...*concerned*, at least.

And he was in a BIG hurry.

After he had filled the bag, Boba threw all the dirty dishes into the cleaning slot. He didn't have to be neat at all. If it hadn't been so scary, it would have been fun.

"Leave the rest," Jango said. "We don't have time."

Be careful what you wish for! How many times had Boba dreamed of having time away from stormy Kamino and living somewhere else, with sunshine—and maybe even friends?

Now it was happening. The having time away part, anyway. Boba was glad, and yet...

There was the bed where he had slept and dreamed. The windowsill where he had sat and read and watched the endless rain. The box where he had kept his books, clothes, and old toys, all in one pile.

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It's hard to leave the only place you've ever lived, especially when you don't know when you'll be back. It's like leaving behind little pieces of yourself. It's like...

Boba caught himself. This was no time to get sentimental. His father was in a hurry. They had to get going.

And there was one last thing he had to do before leaving Tipoca City.

"Whoa! Where are you going?" Jango asked. His battle armor was on, helmet and all. He was holding what looked like a whip. "Where are you taking that stuff?"

"Uh, Dad...library books?"

Boba hoped his father would understand that he had to return them. Who knew when they were coming back? And Boba didn't want Whrr to be charging him for overdue books.

"Make it fast, son," Jango said. "And while you're at it—"

He handed Boba the "whip." It was the eel. "Turn him loose in the sea. Let him try feeding himself for a change."

"Yes, sir!" Boba was out the door before his father could change his mind. The eel was coiled around one arm, and he carried the books in the other.

He ran through the rain as fast as he could. He stopped at the edge of the platform where he had taken the sea-mouse. He leaned over the railing and dropped the eel into the waves.

*Plunk.*

Boba saw a dark shape, a flash of teeth. And the eel was gone.

"Good riddance!" he muttered as he ran toward the library. "Life is hard for the small and the weak. And it's all relative."

Boba hurriedly shoved the books into the slot. One, two, three...

Whrr whirred happily. "How about this batch?" he asked from behind the door, in his tinny voice. "What did you think? Any good?"

"Not too bad," Boba said. "But I don't have time to talk now."

## Terry Bisson

“No? Why not? Don’t you want to check out some more books?”

Usually Boba liked talking about books. But today there was no time. “Have to go!” he said. “So long!”

“Hurry back, Boba,” Whrr said. “But wait, here’s...”

“No time to wait!” Boba didn’t have the heart to tell his friend that he didn’t know when he would be coming back.

So he just turned and ran.

Jango Fett, fierce looking in his full battle armor, was waiting with the flight bag in front of the apartment. Boba could tell his father was mad at him for taking so long. But neither of them said anything.

The two walked quickly to the tiny landing pad where *Slave I*, the bounty hunter’s small, swift starship, was parked. Jango stowed the bags while Boba checked out the ship for takeoff.

Boba had just completed the preflight “walk-around” when he heard footsteps. At first he thought it might be Taun We, coming to say good-bye.

No such luck.

It was the Jedi, Obi-Wan Kenobi. The one who had been at the apartment asking all the questions.

And he was running.

“Stop!” he shouted.

*Yeab, right!* thought Boba.

Jango clearly had the same thought. He drew his blaster and fired, while ordering, “Boba, get on board!”

Boba didn’t have to be told twice. He got into the cockpit and watched as his father fired up his battle armor’s jet-pack and rocketed to the top of a nearby building. There, Jango Fett knelt and began to fire down at the Jedi with his blaster rifle.

*KA-WHLAP!*

*KA-WHLAP!*

Though he had never flown *Slave I* alone, Boba knew all the controls and weapons systems by heart. Reaching over his head,



## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

he switched the main systems on, so the ship would be ready to go when his father got through whipping the Jedi.

Then he got an even better idea. He activated the blaster cannon controls.

Boba had practiced this so many times, he knew just how to do it. He got the Jedi in the sights and pressed FIRE.

*SKA-PLANG!*

A hit! Or almost.

The Jedi was thrown violently to the ground, his lightsaber knocked out of his hand. Boba was about to fire again and finish him off when his father got in the way.

Jango rocketed down from the building and stood face-to-face with the Jedi.

The Jedi charged.

Jango charged back.

*Cool!* thought Boba. He had never seen his father in hand-to-hand combat before, and it was awesome.

The Jedi's mysterious Force was no match for Jango Fett's Mandalorian body armor. The Jedi was losing—badly. He got desperate and made a grab, but Jango used his jet-pack to blast up and kick him away.

“Go!” shouted Boba, even though he knew no one could hear.

The Jedi fell and slid toward the edge of the landing pad, where it projected out over the crashing waves. He seemed to be using his so-called Force to get his lightsaber back, but Jango Fett spoiled that plan. From his wrist gauntlet, he shot out a restraining wire, which wrapped around the Jedi's wrists.

Then Jango fired up his jet-pack again, dragging the Jedi toward the edge of the platform—and the water.

“Go, Dad!” Boba shouted.

But the Jedi was able to catch the wire on a column. It stopped his slide and pulled him to his feet. Then he yanked on the wire....

*SPROINNGG!!*

## Terry Bisson

Jango hit the platform, hard. His jet-pack flared, spat...and exploded.

*BARRROOOM!*

*Oh, no!* Boba saw the whole thing. He tried to get a shot with the laser, but now both men were sliding toward the edge of the platform—and the huge waves crashing below.

“Dad!” Boba yelled. “Dad!” He banged on the cockpit canopy, as if his fists and his cries could somehow stop his father’s slide toward certain death—

But it wasn’t over yet. Jango Fett ejected the wire from his wrist gauntlet, freeing himself. Then he used the gripping claws built into his battle armor to stop his slide at the last instant.

Meanwhile, the Jedi slid right over the edge.

Boba fell back in his seat, shaking with relief: His father was safe. And triumph: The Jedi was gone!

Over the edge. Into the sea.

*Good riddance!* Boba thought.

The ramp was opening.

Boba scrambled out of the pilot’s seat just in time.

His father leaped into the seat. The engines roared to life, and the starship lifted off into the storm, which was raging all around.

Boba looked down at the waves. There was no sign of the Jedi, and no wonder. Who could swim in that stupid robe? It had dragged him under, for sure.

“Life is hard for the small and the weak!” Boba said under his breath, and they hurtled upward, into the clouds.

“What, Boba?”

“I said, ‘Good going, Dad!’”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Boba had been in space before, traveling with his father. But when you are real little, you don't notice a lot.

Now that he was ten, he understood what he was seeing. Everything looked new and exciting.

On Kamino it was almost always cloudy. The clouds were gray on the bottom, and black as night on the inside. But from above, they were as white as the snow Boba had seen in vids and read about in books.

The sky above was bright, bright blue.

Then, as *Slave I* rose higher and higher, the sky grew darker—blue-black, then inky black. Then Boba saw something even more beautiful than the clouds.

Stars.

Boba knew what they were, of course. He had read about the stars; he had seen them in vids and pictures, and observed them personally on trips with his father to other planets. Yet he had never really paid attention. Little kids don't notice things that are *that* far away. And the stars were almost never visible from cloudy Kamino, even at night. But now he was ten, and now...

Boba saw a million stars, each light-years away.

"Wow," he said.

"What is it, Boba?" his father asked.

## Terry Bisson

Boba didn't know what to say. The galaxy was made of a million suns, burning fiercely. Around each sun were planets, each made of a million rocks and stones, and each stone was made of millions of atoms, and...

"It's the galaxy," Boba said. "Why is there...?"

"Why is there what, Boba?"

"Why is there so much of it?"

Jango Fett let his son "fly" *Slave I*, which meant just sitting in the pilot's seat while the autopilot flew the ship. He was busy fitting his battle armor with a new jet-pack to replace the one that had blown up in the fight with the Jedi.

When he was done, he got into the pilot's seat, and Boba asked, "Are we moving to another world, Dad?"

"For now."

"Which one?"

"You'll see."

"Why?"

"Why are you asking so many questions?"

That was Boba's signal to shut up. His father had his reasons for everything, but he usually kept them to himself.

"You don't want to know," Jango Fett said as he hit the button marked HYPERSPACE.

If space was awesome, hyperspace was double awesome.

Double awesome strange.

As soon as *Slave I* shifted into lightspeed and slipped into hyperspace, Boba's head started to spin. The stars were flying past like raindrops. It was like a dream, with far and near twisted together, time and space mixed like oil and water, in swirls.

Boba dozed off, because even strange becomes tiring when *everything* is strange....

Boba dreamed he was meeting the mother he had never had. He was at a big reception in a palace, and he was alone. It was like a story in a book. There was someone coming toward him,

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making her way through the crowd. She was beautiful, in a white dress. She was walking toward Boba, faster and faster, and her smile was as bright as...

“Boba?”

“Yes!?”

“Wake up, son.”

Boba opened his eyes and saw his father at the controls of *Slave I*. They were out of hyperspace, back in “normal,” three-dimensional space.

They were floating. Directly ahead of them was a huge red planet with orange rings.

It was beautiful, but not as beautiful as the vision Boba had seen in his dream, coming toward him across the ballroom floor. Not as beautiful as...Boba felt himself slipping back into his dream.

“Geonosis,” said Jango Fett.

“What?” Boba sat up.

“Name of the planet. Geonosis.”

As *Slave I* approached Geonosis, it headed toward the rings. Only from a distance were they smooth and beautiful. Up close, Boba could see that the rings were made out of asteroids and meteors, lumps of rock and ice—space rubble.

Up close they were dangerous and ugly.

Jango’s hands were dancing over the starship’s controls, switching them from autopilot to manual. Flying under the rings would be tricky. As he expertly eased the ship into approach orbit, he said, “Next time, when we get to a planet that’s easier to land on, I’ll let you fly the approach on your own, son.”

“Really, Dad? Does that mean I’m old enough?”

Jango patted his son on the shoulder. “Just about, Boba. Just about.”

Boba leaned back, smiling. Life was better than dreams. Who needed a mom when you had a dad like Jango Fett?

## Terry Bisson

Suddenly Boba caught a glimpse of something on the rear vid screen. A blip. “Dad, I think we’re being tracked!”

Jango’s smile disappeared. The blip was matching their every turn. A ship on their tail.

“Look at the sensor screen,” Boba said excitedly. “Isn’t that a cloaking shadow?”

Jango switched the sensor screen to higher res. It showed a tracker attached to the hull of *Slave I*.

Boba couldn’t believe it. Hadn’t he watched the Jedi slide into the stormy sea of Kamino? How could the Jedi have survived to follow them?

“He must have put a tracking device on our hull during the fight,” said Jango, with the steel of determination in his voice. “We’ll fix that!”

Boba was just about to ask *how*, when his dad pushed him back into his seat.

“Hang on, son. We’ll move into the asteroid field. He won’t be able to follow us there. If he does, we’ll leave him a couple of surprises.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Into the asteroid field! Boba felt a cold touch of fear as his father pulled back on the controls and *Slave I* slid upward, into the ring itself.

Jagged rocks zipped past, on either side. It was like flying through a forest of stone.

Boba couldn't look. And he couldn't not look, either. He knew that if they hit one, they were dead.

Obliterated.

Erased.

They wouldn't even leave a ripple on the galaxy.

Then Boba told himself: *Stop worrying. Look who's at the controls!*

Boba kept his eyes on his father. The asteroids were still zipping past *Slave I* but they didn't seem quite as scary.

Jango Fett was at the controls.

Boba relaxed and checked the rear viewscreen. "He's gone," he told his father.

"He must have gone on toward the surface," Jango replied.

Suddenly the image on the viewscreen wavered with a rogue signal. In the static Boba saw a familiar outline.

The Delta-7.

"Look, Dad, he's back!"

## Terry Bisson

Jango calmly hit a button on the weaponry console marked SONIC CHARGE: RELEASE.

Boba looked back and saw a canister drifting toward the Jedi starfighter.

He grinned. So long! The Jedi was doomed....

And so was Boba. Because when he turned back around in his seat and looked forward, he saw nothing but stone. *Slave I* was heading straight for a huge, jagged asteroid!

“Dad! Watch out!”

Jango’s voice was quiet and cold as he pulled *Slave I* into a steep climb, barely missing the killer rock. “Stay calm, son. We’ll be fine. That Jedi won’t be able to follow us through this.”

That was the plan, anyway. But the Jedi had other ideas. As his father deftly guided *Slave I* through the asteroid field, Boba kept his eyes on the rear screen.

“There he is!” he cried.

The Jedi starfighter was still there, right on their tail. It was as if it were tied to *Slave I*.

Jango shook his head grimly. “He doesn’t seem to be able to take a hint. Well, if we can’t lose him, we’ll have to finish him.”

Hitting a button, he turned the starship and headed straight toward another asteroid, even bigger than the last one.

Only this time, he didn’t pull up. Instead, he flew straight toward the jagged surface.

Boba couldn’t believe it. Was his own father trying to kill them both? “Watch out!” he cried.

He closed his eyes, waiting for the explosion. *So this is what it’s like to die*, he thought. He felt amazingly calm. He wondered how badly it would hurt when they hit. Or would it just be like a flash of light? Or...

Or nothing.

With Jango Fett at the controls, *Slave I* never slowed, never hesitated.

It looked like certain death.



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The ship dove straight down into a narrow canyon on the asteroid's surface.

At the bottom was a cave, with an opening just big enough for a small starship turned on its side.

Just barely big enough...

Something was wrong.

Nothing had happened. Boba was still alive.

He opened his eyes.

He saw rock everywhere. His dad had flown full speed into a hole in the asteroid, and now *Slave I* was speeding through a narrow, winding tunnel.

But going slower and slower.

*At least we're still alive*, thought Boba. *But if the Jedi is chasing us, why are we slowing down?*

He soon found out. The tunnel went all the way through the asteroid. When *Slave I* emerged from the stone passage, it was right behind the Jedi starfighter.

The hunted had become the hunter. *Slave I* was on the Jedi's tail.

It was the coolest maneuver Boba had ever imagined. He could hardly control his excitement.

"Get him, Dad! Get him! Fire!"

Boba didn't have to tell his father. Jango Fett was already blasting away. On every side of the Jedi starfighter deadly lasers were stitching streaks of light through the blackness of space.

"You got him!" Boba cried, when he saw the Jedi starfighter rocked by an explosion.

A near-miss, but not a kill.

Not yet.

"We'll just have to finish him!" said Jango. He reached up to the weaponry console and, with two quick flicks of his wrist, hit two switches:

TORPEDO: ARM

and then

TORPEDO: RELEASE

## Terry Bisson

It was *Slave P's* turn to rock as the torpedo kicked out of the hull and locked onto the Jedi starfighter.

Boba watched, fascinated. The Jedi was good, he had to admit. He zigged, he zagged, he tried every kind of evasive maneuver.

But the torpedo was locked on, and closing.

Then the Jedi starfighter flew straight into the path of a huge, tumbling asteroid—

And it was all over.

There was no way to avoid the collision. Caught between the torpedo's blast and the unforgiving stone, the Jedi starfighter disappeared. Only a trail of debris remained.

"Got him..." Boba breathed. "Yeaaaaah!"

Jango's reaction was more subdued. "We won't see him again," he said quietly as he guided the ship out of the asteroids and put it into a descent pattern, down toward the giant red planet.

## CHAPTER NINE

Boba had thought Geonosis might be different from Kamino, with schools, other kids, and lots to do.

It was different, all right, but that was all.

On Kamino it rained all the time; on Geonosis it hardly ever rained. Kamino was all sea; Geonosis was a sea of red sand, with big rock towers called stalagmites sticking up like spikes, here and there, from the sandy desert.

In fact, the planet looked deserted. At least that's what Boba thought when he first arrived.

Jango Fett landed *Slave I* on a ledge on the side of one of the stalagmites, or rock towers.

*Are we going to camp here on this rock?* wondered Boba as the ship settled on its landing struts and the engines died.

Then a door in the stone slid open, and Maintenance Droids appeared to service the ship.

Boba was wide-eyed as he followed his father through the doorway, which turned out to be the entrance to a vast underground city, with long corridors and huge rooms, all connected and lighted with glow tubes, echoing with footsteps and shouts.

## Terry Bisson

Yet it still seemed empty. The only inhabitants were hurrying, distant shadows. No one greeted them; no one even noticed a ten-year-old tagging along after his father.

As they climbed the stairs toward the apartment they had been temporarily assigned, Jango explained to his son that the Geonosians themselves were drones who worked all the time. Their planet was a manufacturing center for Battle Droids. “And the people who make the droids aren’t much smarter or more interesting than the droids themselves,” Jango said.

“So why are we here?” Boba asked.

“Business,” said Jango Fett. “*He who hires my hand...*”

“...*hires my whole self*,” finished Boba, grinning up at his dad.

“Right,” said Jango. He ruffled his son’s hair and smiled down at him. “I’m very proud of you, son. You’re growing up to be a bounty hunter, just like your old man.”

The apartment was high in the stone tower, overlooking the desert. Jango went off to meet with his employer, leaving Boba with a stern warning: “Be here when I get back.”

After a couple of hours alone in the apartment, Boba knew that his first impressions had been right. Geonosis was boring. Even more boring than Kamino.

Boredom is kind of like a microscope. It can make little things look big. Boba counted all the stones in the walls of the apartment. He counted all the cracks in the floor.

Bored with cracks and stones, he stared out the narrow window, watching the dust storms roll across the plains and watching the rings wheel across the sky above.

Boba wished he had brought some books. The only one he had was the black book his father had given him, the one he couldn’t open. It was in a box with his clothes and old toys, not even worth looking for.

He’d have to make his own excitement. But how?

*Be here when I get back.* That didn’t mean he couldn’t leave the apartment. Just that he couldn’t go very far.

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Boba stepped out into the hallway, closing the door behind him. The stone corridor was dim and quiet. In the distance Boba could hear a booming noise. It sounded almost like the sea on stormy Kamino.

Could there be an ocean here, on this desert planet?

Boba walked to the end of the corridor and stuck his head around the corner. The booming was louder. Now it sounded like a distant drum.

Around the corner there was a stone stairway, leading down. At the bottom the stairs, another hall. At the end of the hall, another stairway.

Stone steps, leading down, into the darkness. Boba followed them, feeling his way, one step at a time. The farther he went, the darker it got.

The darker it got, the louder the booming. It sounded like a giant beating a drum.

Boba had the feeling he had gone too far, but he didn't want to turn back. Not yet. Not until he had discovered what was making the booming noise.

Then a last, long spiral staircase ended in a narrow hallway. The hallway ended at a heavy door. The booming was so loud that the door itself was shaking.

Boba was almost afraid to look. He was about to turn back. Then, in his mind, he heard his father's voice: *Do that which you fear most, and you will find the courage you seek.*

Boba pulled the door open.

BOOM

BOOM

BOOM

There was no wild ocean storm, no giant beating a drum. But Boba was not disappointed. What he saw was even more amazing.

He was looking into a vast underground room, lighted by glowing lamps, and filled with moving shapes. As his eyes

## Terry Bisson

adjusted to the dim light, he could see a long assembly line, where huge metal machines were stamping out arms and legs, wheels and blades, heads and torsos. The noise was thunderous. The heavy, rust-colored parts, once stamped, were carried on clattering belts to a central area, where they were assembled by grim-faced Geonosians into warlike Battle Droids, which snapped to attention as soon as their heads were screwed on.

The assembled droids then marched in long lines out of the cavern, through a high, arched doorway, into the darkness.

Boba watched, fascinated. What was the purpose of all these weapons of war? It was hard to believe that there was room in the galaxy for so many Battle Droids and droidekas bristling with blades and blasters.

He imagined them all in action, fighting one another. It was exciting to think about—and a little scary, too.

“Hey, you there!”

Boba looked up. A Security Droid was hurrying his way, across a cartwalk toward the open door. Rather than explain who he was and what he was doing, Boba decided to do the sensible thing.

He slammed the door and ran.

*Be here when I get back*, Jango had said. Boba was just shutting the apartment door behind him when he heard footsteps in the hall outside.

*Barely made it!* thought Boba as his father opened the door.

Two men were with him. One of them was a Geonosian, wearing the elaborate finery of a high official over its branchlike body and barrel-shaped head. The other was more simply dressed, but somehow familiar.

“And so you see, Count Dooku, we have made great progress,” said the Geonosian.

It was the *Count* that did it. Boba recognized the other man. “Isn’t that Count Tyranus?” Boba asked his father, who was hanging up his battle helmet beside the door.

## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

“Sssshhhhh,” said Jango. “We are the only ones who know him by that name.”

“Ah, so this is the young one?” the Count said. “You’ll be a great bounty hunter someday.”

He patted Boba on the head. The gesture was affectionate but the hand was cold, and Boba felt a chill.

“Yes, sir,” he said, pulling away.

His father shot him a stern, disapproving look as the three men walked into the apartment’s kitchen for their conference.

Boba felt ashamed. He had been rude. The chill must have been his imagination. Count Tyranus was Jango Fett’s main employer. Boba owed him not only respect, but trust.

*You’ll be a great bounty hunter someday.* The Count’s words rang in Boba’s head. He hoped someday they would come true.

His father’s battle helmet was hanging by the door. Boba took it down and carried it into the bedroom.

He wanted to see what it looked like from inside. He wanted to feel how it felt to be Jango Fett.

He shut the door behind him and pulled the helmet over his head. He opened his eyes and—

“Wow!”

Boba had expected it to be dark inside the helmet, but it wasn’t. There were all sorts of displays scrolling down the inside of the faceplate. Most of them were for weapons and survival systems:

ROCKET DARTS  
SONIC BEAM  
WRIST GAUNTLET  
JET-PACK  
BOOT SPIKES  
COMLINK  
RANGEFINDER

It was like being in the control room of a very small, compact, efficient ship. But it was too heavy. Boba could hardly move his head. He was just lifting it off when—

*Click.*

## Terry Bisson

Boba heard the bedroom door open. Uh-oh. Now he was in big trouble!

But no—Jango Fett was laughing as he lifted the helmet off Boba's head. "Don't worry, son, your own armor will fit you better."

Boba looked up into his father's eyes. "My own?"

"When you are older," Jango said. "This battle armor was given to me by the Mandalores. You will have your own someday, when you become a bounty hunter."

"And you will teach me to use it?" Boba asked.

"When that day comes, I may not be there," Jango said. "You may be on your own."

"But..."

"No buts," said Jango. He attempted a smile. "Don't worry. Your time is yet to come."

He reached out and patted Boba on the head.

This time, there was no chill.

Later that night, Boba heard a strange noise. It was not the booming he had heard before. It was not his father's snores, which came from the next bed.

OOWOOOO!

It was something far away and incredibly lonely.

He went to the narrow window and looked out. The night on Geonosis was as bright as day had been on cloudy Kamino. The planet's orange rings shed a soft light over the desert sands.

There was a red mesa right below the stalagmite city. It was crisscrossed with faint trails that glittered, as if they were paved with diamonds.

The mesa looked interesting but it was strictly off-limits. Jango Fett had said that there were fierce beasts called *massiffs* that prowled the rocks and cliffs.

OOWOOOO!

There it was again—that lonesome, mournful howl. *A massiff*, thought Boba. It sounded more forlorn than fierce.

He knew the feeling.



## **STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive**

He wanted to howl back.

## CHAPTER TEN

When Boba woke up, his father was gone. On the table there was breakfast and a note: *Be here when I get back.*

Boba was out the door.

He heard the distant booming but he went the other way, down to the landing platform. *Slave I* was no longer the only starship. It looked tiny compared to the others, which came in all shapes and sizes, but were mostly bigger.

Boba made sure no one was looking, then climbed up the ramp into the cockpit of *Slave I*. The seat was a little low, but other than that, it felt right. He had already memorized the flight controls for both space and atmosphere. He already knew the weapons systems, the multiple lasers and torpedoes. His dad had taught him most of it, and he had figured out the rest for himself.

Boba knew how to start the ship, program the navcomputer, and engage the hyperdrive. He was sure that before long his father would let him try a complete takeoff and landing. He wanted to be ready.

He imagined he was piloting the ship while his father was mowing down his enemies with the laser.

*“Beware the wrath of the Fetts!”* he cried in triumph as he zigged and zagged through the enemy fighters....

“Hey—”

## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

Boba sat up—he must have fallen asleep! He must have been dreaming.

“Hey, kid!”

It was a Geonosian guard.

“It’s okay,” Boba said. “It’s my dad’s ship.”

He got out of *Slave I* and closed the ramp.

The Geonosian had a stupid but amiable expression.

“How come there’s nothing to do around here?” Boba asked, just to be friendly.

The Geonosian guard smiled and twirled his blaster. “Oh, plenty to do!” he said. “There’s arena! Really cool!”

“What happens in the arena?”

“Kill things!” said the Geonosian.

*Interesting*, thought Boba. It was something to do. “Every day?” he asked eagerly.

“Oh, no,” said the Geonosian. “Only special occasions.”

Rules.

*Rules are made to be broken.*

That was *not* part of Jango Fett’s code. *But it is part of the Kids’ Code*, thought Boba. *Anyway, it oughta be.*

Boba was making excuses. He was getting ready to break his father’s Off-Limits Rule.

He was preparing to slip out of the stalagmite city, to the red mesa.

He was trying to pretend it was all right, that it was something he had to do.

He was looking for adventure.

And he was about to find it.

The first part was easy.

The main door to the stalagmite city was on ground level, down below the landing pad. It was guarded by a drowsy Geonosian sentry, whose job was to watch for intruders, not escapees.

It was easy to slip past him.

## Terry Bisson

As soon as he breathed the outside air, Boba realized how much he hated the musty smell of the stalagmite city. It was great to be outside!

He wanted to explore the glittering trails he had seen from above. He followed the first one he saw. It led down the side of the red rock mesa. The glitter was chips of mica—rock as smooth and shiny as glass that marked the trail and made it easy to follow.

Boba was just rounding a corner on a steep cliff when he heard a scream.

Then a growling noise.

He stopped—then proceeded more cautiously, step by step.

On the narrow trail ahead, two spike-backed beasts were fighting. They were growling, each pulling at one end of what looked like a furry rope.

The rope was hissing in a high-pitched tone.

The rope was a ten-foot snake, covered with fur. Its mouth and eyes were in the center of its long, furry body.

The lizards, which Boba assumed were the dreaded massiffs, were about to tear it in half with their long, razor-sharp teeth.

Then they saw Boba—and dropped the snake.

Boba backed up one step.

The massiffs both moved forward one step. Growling.

Boba backed up another step. The cliff was to his right. To his left, and behind him—nothing but air.

The massiffs moved forward again. Two steps this time.

Snarling.

Boba kept his stare locked on the massiffs' red eyes. He felt that if he looked away for even an instant, they would charge.

They moved forward again, side by side.

Boba knelt down and, feeling with one hand, picked up a slice of mica. Without looking, he tested it with his fingers. It was as sharp as a knife.

Suddenly he jumped up and threw it, spinning, toward the massiff on the right.

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YELP!

A hit! But the other massiff was in the air, leaping toward Boba. He heard a snarl, and felt hot breath on his face, and ducked his head, and...

OOWOOOO!

The massiff missed him and flew off the cliff, howling as it fell toward the jagged rocks below.

Boba straightened up.

The other massiff was bleeding over one red eye. It was backing up, slinking away....

Then it turned and ran.

The snake lay on the trail, nursing its wounds.

Boba's heart was pounding.

*Maybe breaking the rules is not such a good idea*, he thought. He was lucky to be alive.

He considered turning back—but decided that would be pointless. He was already halfway around the mesa. So he stepped over the dazed snake and continued on the path.

He had seen the path from above. He knew it would lead back to the entrance. He would sneak back in, and his father would never know he had been outside.

Then he heard something behind him. Something on the path.

The wounded massiff?

Boba felt a sudden chill. He looked back over his shoulder. It was the snake.

It was slithering along after him.

Boba stopped.

The snake stopped.

Its mouth in the middle of its body was smiling—at least it seemed to be smiling. And it was singing, a sort of rushing sound, like water falling. It sounded strange out here in the desert. It reminded Boba of the rain on Kamino, or the waves.

“Go away,” said Boba.

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The snake kept singing. It slithered a little closer.

Boba backed up. "Go away!"

The snake slithered still closer. Boba picked up a rock—a sharp piece of mica.

"Go away."

The snake looked sad. It stopped singing. It slithered away into the rocks.

Boba was making his way up the path, toward the top of the mesa, when he saw something strange.

There, on a flat ledge under a cliff on the side of the mesa, was a small ship. A starship.

A Delta-7! Could it be...?

Just then Boba heard someone—or something—behind him on the trail.

He ducked behind a rock just in time.

The man who hurried past him along the trail was as familiar as the starship. As familiar, and as unwelcome.

It was the Jedi who had pursued them through the asteroid rings. The Jedi the torpedo had blasted. Obi-Wan Kenobi. Back again!

Boba watched from behind his rock as the Jedi opened his starfighter's hatch and climbed into the cockpit. Boba thought he was about to take off, but he didn't bother to close the hatch.

Whatever the Jedi was up to, Boba knew it was no good. He had to stop him. But how?

From where he was hiding, Boba could see over the rim of the mesa, all the way to the entrance to the stalagmite city. There was the drowsy Geonosian sentry he had slipped past.

The Jedi's starship was hidden from the sentry—but Boba wasn't.

But how could Boba raise an alert?

Boba picked up the biggest piece of mica he could find and wiped it on his sleeve until it shined like glass. Then he used it to reflect the light from Geonosis's sun, which was just peeping

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over the rings. He tilted the mica slab back and forth until he could see a flash of light across the sentry's eyes.

Then he did it again. And again.

Had the sentry seen it?

He had! He was coming down the path, toward the mesa's edge. Boba couldn't risk being seen, so he left the trail and scrambled up a steep ledge to the top of the mesa. When he got to the top of the mesa, he saw the Geonosian guard at the edge of the cliff, looking down. Boba knew he had sighted the Jedi starfighter, because he was talking excitedly on his comm.

Success! Or so it seemed. Boba ran toward the base of the tower—then skidded to a stop.

The gate was closed. He was stuck outside. How could he get inside without being discovered?

Then he got lucky again. The gate suddenly swung open and out came a squad of droidekas. They were in such a hurry to capture the Jedi that they didn't notice Boba, flattened against the rock wall.

He was able to slip through the door just before it closed behind the droidekas.

Safe! Boba was just about to breathe a sigh of relief when he felt a strong metal gauntlet on his shoulder. It felt gentle, yet stern.

"Where you heading, son?" asked Jango Fett. "Where have you been?"

"Uh, outside. Sir."

"Come upstairs. We need to talk."

Boba followed his father up the stairs and into the apartment. There was nothing he could say. There was nothing he could do. He was found out, and he knew it.

He sat down on the couch and watched while his father took off his battle armor and laid it carefully on the floor.

"Another adventure?" Jango Fett asked with a slight smile as he brewed himself a cup of nasty Geonosian grub-tea.

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"I'm really sorry," Boba said. "Really really sorry."

"Sorry for what?" his father asked.

"Disobeying you."

"And that's all?"

"I-I guess," Boba said.

"What about lying to me?"

"I didn't lie," said Boba. "I admitted I was outside."

His father's smile was gone. "Only because you were caught. If you hadn't been..."

"I guess I would have," said Boba. "I'm sorry for that, too."

"I accept your apology, then," said Jango. "As a punishment you are confined to quarters until I say otherwise."

"Yes, sir." Boba breathed a sigh of relief. Confined to quarters meant grounded; it meant he had to stay in the apartment. It wasn't as bad as he had expected.

"It would be worse," said Jango Fett, "except that I owe you one."

"You do?!"

"Sure. For our Jedi friend. The one who somehow managed to escape us in the asteroids. He's been captured now, thanks to you. You alerted the sentry, even though it meant you might get in trouble. You did the right thing."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, Dad. I am sorry I disobeyed you."

"I am, too, Boba," said Jango Fett with a smile. "But I'm proud, as well."

"You are?!"

"I would be worried if you didn't disobey me at least once in your life. It's part of growing up. Part of the process of gaining your independence."

Boba didn't know what to say. Did his father really believe he had only disobeyed him this one time?

So he tried to hide his smile, and didn't say anything.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Confined to quarters.*

It could have been worse. But it was still pretty bad. Boba's lonely life got lonelier now that he was stuck in the apartment.

Jango Fett was very busy, talking business with the Count and the Geonosian they called Archduke, among others. Boba knew better than to try to sneak out.

*Confined to quarters.*

Boba missed his library friend, Whrr.

He was trying to construct a model starfighter from bits of wire when the door suddenly opened.

There in his battle armor stood Jango Fett. "Come, son," was all he said.

That was all he *had* to say!

Boba scrambled to his feet and followed his father down the stairs. He was glad to get out of the apartment, for any reason. And he always felt proud, following his dad. He knew that anyone who saw them was thinking:

*That's Jango Fett. And that's Boba, his kid. He'll be a bounty hunter, too, someday.*

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There was a hush in the dim underground halls. Boba could tell something important was happening. He wondered what it was.

He knew better than to ask. He was lucky enough just to be out of the apartment.

At the end of a long corridor, they encountered a milling crowd of Geonosians. Some had wings on their backs; others didn't. A uniformed sentry waved them through, to the head of the line, and into a huge room with tall ceilings. Though the room was filled with Geonosians, it was so big it seemed almost empty. Every footstep and every cough echoed.

The Archduke and some other officials were seated in a sort of high box at one end of the imposing room, with about a hundred Genosians looking on. Two people stood looking up at them. Something about the way they stood told Boba they were prisoners. But proud, rebellious prisoners.

Jango and Boba squeezed into a crowd of Geonosians at the side of the room.

Somebody banged on something and the room got quiet. Almost, anyway. Everybody turned to look at the prisoners. Boba had to stand on tiptoe to get a good view.

One prisoner was dressed like a Jedi. He was a lot younger than the Jedi called Obi-Wan.

*Maybe he's an apprentice*, Boba thought. Though why anybody would want to be a Jedi was beyond him.

The other prisoner was a woman. And not just any woman. She was the most beautiful woman Boba had ever seen. She had a kind, gentle face—the sort of face he had always imagined his mother might have had, if he'd had a mother.

"You have been charged and found guilty of espionage," said one of the Geonosians.

Another chimed in: "Do you have anything to say before your sentence is carried out?"

The woman spoke up proudly. "You are committing an act of war, Archduke. I hope you are prepared for the consequences."

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The Archduke laughed. “We build weapons, Senator. That is our business. Of course we are prepared.”

*Senator.* Boba was shocked. He pulled his father’s arm. “What’s a Senator doing here, as a prisoner?”

“Shhhhhh!” Jango hissed.

“Get on with it!” demanded another official, a Neimoidian with mottled green skin and bright red eyes. “Carry out the sentence. I want to see her suffer.”

It was the *other* Jedi that Boba wanted to see suffer, not the wannabe—and certainly not the woman. The persistent Jedi. The one they had killed again and again. Jedi Obi-Wan Kenobi.

But where was he?

The Archduke answered Boba’s question. “Your other Jedi friend is waiting for you, Senator. Take them to the arena.”

The arena! Finally they were going to get to see some action. It was what Boba had been waiting for.

And yet, somehow, he dreaded it.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Like almost everything else on Geonosis, the arena was carved out of solid rock. Yet because it was open at the top, the arena was the brightest place in the entire underground city.

The seats were filled with excited Geonosians, all flapping their wings and screaming with excitement, even though nothing was happening yet.

Vendors in bright costumes worked their way through the stands, singing and whistling to advertise their trays of live insects and other Geonosian treats. Boba loved it, even though he wasn't tempted by the squirming tidbits. He could hardly believe his luck. He was out of the apartment, no longer confined to quarters. He was in the arena, about to see a show. Plus, he and his father had the best seats in the house.

They were sitting with the Archduke and the other officials. Jango Fett and Boba followed the Count into the official box. The crowd started cheering wildly, and, at first, Boba thought it might be for his father, or even for the Count.

Then he looked down toward the center of the arena and saw the entertainment.

The Jedi prisoners.

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They were chained to three posts: the young Jedi to one; the Jedi called Obi-Wan to another; and the beautiful woman to the third.

A fat Geonosian official cleared his throat and stood up to make a speech.

“The felons before you have been convicted of espionage against the sovereign system of Geonosis. Their sentence of death is to be carried out in this public arena henceforth.”

The crowd was cheering like crazy, and the fat Geonosian sat down, smiling, as if he thought the cheering were for him.

The littlest Geonosian official stood up and waved his stubby arms. “Let the executions begin!”

Boba had mixed feelings. He hated the older Jedi, Obi-Wan, who had gotten lucky and humiliated Jango Fett by escaping twice.

Boba wanted to watch him die.

The apprentice Jedi, he didn’t care about one way or the other. The problem was the woman. Boba didn’t want to watch her die. Not at all.

One of the Neimoidians did, though. He was rubbing his chubby hands together so hard that they were starting to get red.

Boba looked away, disgusted. *It’s guys like him who give executions a bad name*, he thought.

The crowd suddenly roared even louder.

And no wonder! Three barred gates down in the arena were opening. Riders in fancy costumes, mounted on orrays, were poking at monsters with sticks and spears, driving them into the central ring.

And what monsters! Boba recognized them all from books.

The first was a reek, a sort of killer steed with razor-sharp horns.

The second one was a golden-maned nexu with claws and sharp fangs.

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And the third was an acklay, a monster with large, clenching claws, big enough to cut an orray in half with one pinch.

The crowd loved it, and why not? This was what the execution arena was all about. Death for fun.

Boba was even starting to get into it, a little bit.

The prisoners weren't, though. The woman had gotten out of her chains somehow and climbed to the top of her post.

*Go!* Boba thought. Even though he knew it was wrong, he hoped she would escape. He even had a fantasy that he would help her. Then she would join him to enjoy watching the two Jedi get killed.

Of course, Boba knew such a fantasy was ridiculous. No one would escape. What was happening down in the arena was an entertainment, but it was also an execution.

The reek was running around the arena, slashing at the air with its horn and, it seemed to Boba, enjoying the wild cheers of the crowd. Then the great beast got serious. It charged the young Jedi's post.

*WHAM!* The reek hit the post a smashing blow, while the Jedi dodged sideways as far as his chain would let him. Then the Jedi jumped up, chain and all, onto the reek's back, which was, for him at least, the safest spot in the whole arena.

*Cool move!* Boba thought, in spite of himself.

Then the young Jedi did something even cooler. He wrapped the chain around the reek's horn, so that when the beast backed up and shook its head, the chain was torn free from the post.

Now the Jedi had a chain he could swing like a whip.

Boba cheered. Like the rest of the crowd, he was cheering for the reek.

The other Jedi, Obi-Wan, shifted deftly as the monster knocked the post flat, snapping it in two—and breaking the chain at the same time.

The nexu was after the woman. Its long fangs were bared, and it was trying to claw its way to the top of the post where she was perched, barely holding on.

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Boba closed his eyes.

This one he did *not* want to watch.

The crowd groaned. AAAAAWWWWWW!

Boba opened his eyes. The Jedi Obi-Wan had grabbed a spear somewhere. He was using it to pole-vault over one of the orray riders. The acklay chasing him rammed into the rider and his orray, knocking them both flat. The acklay opened its huge claw, and then—

CRRRRRRUNCH!

It was the rider, an employee of the arena, who had been pinched in half. But the crowd of Geonosians didn't care. They just wanted to see blood. They didn't care whose blood it was.

Meanwhile, the young apprentice Jedi was riding the reek. He was using the chain for a bridle, controlling the beast.

The woman was still trying to get away from the nexu, which had ripped her shirt. Using her chain like a swing, she flew through the air, kicking the nexu into the sand and injuring its leg. Then she landed back on top of the post, out of reach.

*Go!* Boba thought again. Only to himself, of course.

The apprentice Jedi rode up on the reek, the beast completely under his control. The woman jumped on behind him. The nexu spat and snarled with rage—and then was attacked and killed by the reek. The Jedi called Obi-Wan jumped up behind the woman, so there were three of them on the reek, charging around the arena.

The crowd went wild. They weren't exactly cheering the gang of criminals—but they loved the excitement.

Boba cheered, too. He was glad to see the woman get away. So far, anyway.

It was all too much for the Neimoidian, though. He turned to Jango Fett. His beady little eyes were filled with rage.

"This isn't how it is supposed to be. Jango, finish her off!"

Boba watched, wondering what his dad would do. Jango didn't move.

The Neimoidian stared.

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Jango Fett stared back.

The Count broke the silence.

“Patience, Viceroy,” he said. “She will die.”

A cheer went up and Boba looked down toward the arena.

The gates were opening again, all four of them this time. Droidekas rolled in, unfolding as they surrounded the prisoners, their blades gleaming wickedly in the light from the hole above the arena. Before Boba could even blink, the droidekas had completely surrounded the three prisoners on their reek.

It was over.

Boba closed his eyes. He didn’t want to watch. Then he heard a noise behind him.

A very slight clicking sound. He opened his eyes and turned, and saw a terrible sight.

A Jedi, standing behind his father.

The Jedi’s face was dark, like fine wood. His eyes were narrow and cruel. His purple lightsaber was drawn, and ignited.

And held across Jango Fett’s neck.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Geonosians stopped cheering. The droidekas stopped advancing.

The reek, with the two Jedi and the beautiful woman on its back, stopped prancing and bucking and rearing. A hush fell over the entire arena and all eyes turned away from the Jedi and the droidekas. All of a sudden the show was not in the ring, but in the stands.

Everyone was staring at the officials' box, where the Jedi held the lightsaber to Jango Fett's neck.

*We are the show!* Boba realized with horror.

Jango Fett stood perfectly still. His Mandalorian battle armor was useless against a Jedi lightsaber. One flick of the Jedi's wrist and he would be decapitated.

Boba was scared.

As usual, the Count kept calm. Boba had noticed that he liked to turn everything into a game, even a bad situation. Even an emergency.

The Count seemed to know the Jedi.

"Master Windu," he said, in a smooth, oily voice, "how pleasant of you to join us. You're just in time for the moment of

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truth. I would think these two new boys of yours could use a little more training.”

“Sorry to disappoint you,” said the Jedi. “This party’s over.”

The Jedi gave a little hand signal. It looked to Boba as if lights were coming on all over the arena.

Lightsabers.

There were at least a hundred of them—some in the corners down by the ring, others up high in the stands. They came on all at once.

And each was in the hands of a Jedi.

Where had they come from? How had they all gotten in?

Boba was amazed at how bad the Geonosians’ security was. And he was beginning to understand his father’s grudging respect for the Jedi. They had their ways.

The Count, as always, tried to seem unimpressed. That was his style in a crisis.

“Brave but foolish, my old Jedi friend,” he said. “You’re impossibly outnumbered.”

“I don’t think so,” said the Jedi called Windu. He scanned the crowd with his hooded eyes. “The Geonosians aren’t warriors. One Jedi has to be worth a hundred Geonosians.”

But the Count came right back at him. “It wasn’t the Geonosians I was thinking about.”

It was the Count’s turn to give a hand signal, even slighter and more subtle than the one the Jedi had given. Boba heard a sound like a storm on Kamino—a low rumble. Suddenly all the doors in the arena opened and every aisle in the stands was filled with Battle Droids.

The Battle Droids ran down the aisles with their lasers flashing, firing at the Jedi and scorching whatever else was in their way.

Lasers flashed overhead, and Boba ducked. The Jedi called Windu had gone from offense to defense in an instant. He was deflecting the droids’ lasers with his lightsaber; it was like fencing with the air.

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That was all Jango Fett needed. He crouched and fired the flamethrower that was built into his battle armor.

WHOOOOOSH!

Windu was engulfed in a torrent of orange flame, and his robe caught fire. It flared behind him like the exhaust of a rocket as the Jedi jumped out of the stands into the ring.

Jango let him go. He turned and went into action with the Battle Droids and the Geonosian troops, toasting the Jedi with vicious laser fire.

The Jedi all began to clump in the center of the arena, back-to-back, around the reek with the apprentice Jedi, Obi-Wan, and the beautiful woman still on its back.

The fight was on!

The reek wanted no part of it. It leaped into the air, throwing the three off its back. Then it ran in wild circles, snarling and snorting, stomping and stamping, crushing droids, Geonosian troops, Jedi, and bystanders under its hooves.

“Go!” Boba shouted, out loud this time. It didn’t matter which side he was on—it was exciting to watch. Blood and bodies were flying. And the only person down there in the ring that he liked, the pretty woman, was unhurt, at least so far.

She was standing in the middle of the ring with the Jedi. Somebody had tossed her a blaster rifle. She was pretty good with it, too, blasting droids and Geos on all sides.

Jango was standing right beside Boba, taking a heavy toll from the stands, firing with deadly accuracy into the Jedi. It was the first time Boba had ever been in such a big battle with his father.

And he loved it!

“Stay down, Boba!” Jango ordered, and Boba knew better than to disobey. But he was able to peek over the railing and see down into the ring.

In the middle of all the confusion, Boba saw the Jedi called Mace Windu, the one his dad had scorched. He was mowing

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down droids and Geonosian troops with his lightsaber, rallying the Jedi with his boldness.

The reek saw him, too. The big, horned beast singled him out and started chasing him around the arena. Boba had to laugh. The Jedi had gone from hound to hare in about one second.

Mace Windu tried to make a stand. He skidded to a stop and slashed out at the reek with his lightsaber. But the reek kept coming—and knocked the lightsaber out of his hand.

It went flying, and the Jedi took off running again.

Jango Fett put his big, gloved hand on his son's head and growled, "Stay here, Boba. I'll be back!"

That turned out to be the last thing he ever told his only son.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jango Fett used the jet-pack on his Mandalorian battle armor to rocket down into the arena. He landed right in the middle of the fighting. The runaway reek, which made no distinction between friend and foe, tried to stomp him.

From the stands, Boba saw his father dodging and rolling, trying to get out of the way. He bit his tongue to keep from screaming out. Those hooves were as sharp as knives.

But Boba needn't have worried. His dad rolled free, jumped to his feet, and proceeded to kill the beast. A couple of blasts and the reek was no more.

Then Jango Fett and the Jedi Mace Windu faced off, one-on-one, while the fight raged all around them.

Boba stood on tiptoe, trying to see, and at the same time dodging the bolts that were filling the air like angry insects. Super Battle Droids, more powerful than the Battle Droids, were now dominating the battle.

The dust rose in a cloud. The arena was filled with screams and shouts, the clash of lightsabers and bolts of laser fire. Boba yelled "Dad!" as he tried to see.

And then he saw.

He saw.

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He saw the Jedi's lightsaber swing in a deadly arc. He saw his father's empty helmet go flying. He saw his father's body drop to its knees, as if in prayer.

Boba watched in breathless horror as Jango Fett fell lifeless onto the bloody sand.

"No!" Boba cried. *No, it can't be!*

The concussion from a nearby blast of laser fire knocked Boba down. He stumbled to his feet, ears ringing, and saw that the arena below was littered with bodies and pieces of droids and droidekas.

The acklay and the reek both were dead. The Jedi were outnumbered but still fighting. And the beautiful woman was right in the middle of it all, blasting droids and Geonosians alike.

Boba couldn't see his father or the Jedi he had been fighting. Had he dreamed it all? The swing of the lightsaber, the helmet flying off; the warrior falling to his knees, then toppling over, like a tree.

A bad dream, Boba decided. *That was it!* His father was somewhere back up in the stands. Boba knew that he didn't like to fight alongside droids. Jango Fett scorned the droids because they had no imagination. *Imagination*, he often said, *is a warrior's most important weapon.*

*A bad dream*, Boba thought, pushing his way down the stairs, toward the arena.

Even without imagination, the Super Battle Droids were winning. They were programmed to win, or at least to never give up. And even with all their losses, they far outnumbered the Jedi.

The droids in the stands kept firing, and the droids in the arena kept advancing, and soon there were only twenty or so Jedi left.

They stood in a clump in the center of the arena, back-to-back, lightsabers and lasers drawn. Trapped!

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The aisles were full, so Boba climbed down from seat to seat, toward the arena. The Geonosians were cheering as the droids moved in for the kill. Then the Count raised his hand.

“Master Windu!”

Silence.

Boba stopped. *What’s this?* He watched as the Jedi his father had been fighting stepped forward, covered with dust and sweat.

“You have fought gallantly,” said the Count. “Worthy of recognition in...”

Boba didn’t wait to hear more. He knew it was all a lie. It had to be.

He continued to jump from seat to seat, down toward the ring, pushing and shoving his way through the crowd.

He couldn’t think. He didn’t *want* to think. He just wanted to get into the ring and find his father, Jango Fett, who would tell him: *Don’t worry, Boba, it was all a dream. A bad, bad dream.*

“Now it is finished,” said the Count. “Surrender, and your lives will be spared.”

“We will not be hostages for you to barter with, Dooku.”

“Then I’m sorry, old friend,” said the Count. “You will have to be destroyed.”

The Count nodded and the droids were just about to fire into the little clump of Jedi, ending the whole thing, when all of a sudden the woman looked up.

All around the arena, the Geonosians started looking up.

Boba stopped and looked up, too.

Gunships were descending from the sky.

One, two, three gunships...six altogether.

They landed around the Jedi survivors. Doors in the ships opened and troops poured out, running down the ramps, firing at the droids. Boba knew the troops well, although he was surprised to see them. The Jedi began backing into the ships, still blocking laser blasts with their lightsabers.

The battle was on again, but Boba hardly noticed. He was running again, jumping from seat to seat, down toward the arena,

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as the gunships took off, with the Jedi still running up the ramps. Some were barely hanging on by their fingertips as the ships rose.

They were getting away. Not only the beautiful woman, but the Jedi he and his father hated. The Obi-Wan Jedi; the apprentice Jedi; the dark-faced fighter called Mace Windu. They were all escaping!

Boba didn't care. All he cared about was finding his father. He ran down the last aisle, pushing his way through the stunned crowd.

He climbed over the wall and jumped into the arena.

"Dad! Dad! Where are you?!"

The dirt and sand under his feet were soaked with blood. Bodies lay in heaps on all sides.

A droid that had been blasted in half was thrashing around in a circle, kicking weapons, droid pieces, and bodies in every direction.

One piece rolled toward Boba, hit his foot, and stopped.

Boba looked down and saw—Jango Fett's battle helmet.

*Dad!* With its narrow eye-slits, it was as familiar as his father's face. More familiar, in fact.

It was bloody. It was empty. It was as blank and as final as the period at the end of a book.

Over. End of story.

As he fell on his knees and picked up his father's battle helmet, Boba knew that the nightmare he had seen from the stands had been no dream.

It was real. All of it.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

No one notices a ten-year-old kid, especially in the midst of a battle.

Especially when he is wandering in a daze, stepping over bodies and trails of blood, oblivious to the laser bolts whining through the air near his head or spinning into the bloody sand at his feet.

Especially when he is ignoring the shouts of the living and the screams of the dying; ignoring even his own cries.

Boba was invisible.

He was invisible even to himself. He didn't know what he was thinking or what he was feeling or what he was doing. He was numb. It was like walking through somebody else's dream.

He carried his father's empty battle helmet cradled in both arms, while he stumbled around the arena in the remains of the battle; while the troops were fighting the last of the droids and the gunships were departing with the rescued Jedi; while the panicked Geonosians were evacuating the arena in a stampede.

He carried the broken piece of his father's armor through the broken pieces of his world.

Did he think he could put his father back together?

Did he think he could put his life back together?

Boba didn't think anything. He was numb.

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It was all gone, all shattered.

It had all come to pieces. Pieces lay everywhere. Pieces of droids, body parts, the dead and the dying. Those who were still alive, and some of those who weren't, were firing their blasters wildly.

Boba walked past a spinning droid, its right leg shot off. It was firing around and around as it spun, spraying the upper tiers of the arena and the panicked crowd of Geonosians.

Laser bolts hit the ground around him, throwing up geysers of sand. Boba didn't care. Boba walked on.

Crouching troops in battle armor hurried by, firing as they ran. One grabbed Boba's arm and threw him to the ground. "Get down!"

WHARROOOMM!

An explosion ripped through the air where Boba had been. He hit flat on his belly.

WHARROOOMM!

Another explosion—and Boba felt sand stinging his cheeks. He buried his face in his arms, next to the empty helmet. When he opened his eyes and looked up, he saw—

*Dad!* It was his father, Jango Fett, looking down at him! Boba reached up for his father's hand, and—

Then, suddenly, Boba saw how wrong he was. It was not his father. It was the trooper who had saved his life, or one of the others. For they all looked exactly alike beneath the armor. It was his twin, only older. It was his father, only younger.

It was one of the clones.

As he stumbled to his feet, Boba realized clearly—and with horror—that the troops that had poured out of the gunships were the clone army that his father had trained on Kamino. Here they were, in action for the first time, on Geonosis. And unbeatable, just as his father had predicted. But they were fighting on the wrong side. Fighting for the hated Jedi!

*No!* Boba thought, clenching his fists. His disappointment was replaced by feelings of betrayal and rage.

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“Just a kid!” the trooper said. “Thought you were one of us.” He ran with the other clones toward a departing gunship.

“I’m not one of you!” Boba muttered angrily. “And I never will be. I am Jango Fett’s *real* son.”

The arena was almost empty. The Archduke was nowhere to be seen. The Count was nowhere to be seen. The fighting was almost over. The last gunship was leaving, blasting upward through the opening over the arena.

Boba hardly noticed. He was looking down, not up. He didn’t care about the clones anymore. He had a job to do. One last job for Jango Fett.

It was getting dark. The rings of Geonosis filled half the sky with an orange glow. With the helmet in his arms, Boba was walking in circles, stumbling through the blood-damp sand. Finally, he found what he was looking for. Stumbled across it, in fact.

It was his father’s body, still clothed in the remaining pieces of Mandalorian battle armor, scuffed and bloodied.

Boba placed his father’s helmet on his father’s chest, then sat down beside him. He was tired and it was time to rest. He noticed a tear slowly making its way down through the gritty sand on his cheek. He wiped it away with his fist.

It was too soon to cry. Boba still had a job to do.

It was dark, or as dark as it gets on the ringed planet. The battle had moved out of the arena and had covered a wide part of the land.

The Geonosians—now under the control of the victorious Jedi—sent in squads of drones to pick up the dead. They were tossed on a fire. The smashed and broken droids were luckier. They were picked up by a scoop to be taken outside to a scrap pile, for recycling.

Boba was sitting by his father’s body when the scoop rolled by, on its second pass through the bloody arena.

## Terry Bisson

Boba knew what he had to do. He was not like the clones. He was Jango Fett's *real* son. It was his job to take care of his father's body. And as long as he did his job, he could put off feeling the feelings that he didn't want to feel.

The scoop whined and jerked as it moved from place to place, blindly scouring the sand for more parts. Boba dragged his father's body into the scoop's path, where it would be picked up. In his Mandalorian battle armor, Jango Fett felt to the scoop just like a droid. A broken droid.

Boba got on the scoop and sat beside his father. He held the battle helmet in his arms as the robot scoop headed out of the arena, down a long passage leading out to the desert.

Boba was doing his job. That was all that mattered.  
For now.

The droid scrap yard was under the mesa where Boba had spotted the Jedi in his starfighter. It was an immense heap of broken circuits, busted arms and legs, wheels and heads and steel knives and torsos.

The scoop made its dump and headed back into the stalagmite city, through an underground passage. Boba dragged his father's body off the scrap pile and onto the rocky mesa.

The mesa seemed a better resting place. More peaceful, and certainly more beautiful.

Boba removed his father's battle armor and set it aside. He took one last look at the strong arms and legs that had protected him. Then, using a broken droid arm for a shovel, Boba buried his father in a sandy grave overlooking the desert.

The broken droid arm made a "J," and Boba found another that he bent to make an "F." He arranged them on top of the grave.

*JF.* Jango Fett. Gone but not forgotten.

Boba suddenly felt very tired. He sat down beside his father's battle armor. He wished he had something to eat.

He shivered. The wind off the desert was cold.

## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

Boba leaned back against the helmet and looked up at the great orange rings that encircled the planet. It was if they were holding it in their arms. It was a peaceful sight....

Boba slept peacefully all that night. His dreams (and he forgot them) were of the mother he had never had, and the father he had been lucky enough to have. He awoke in the morning, rested and surprisingly comfortable. Then he saw that a furry sand snake had wrapped itself around him as he slept, keeping him warm.

Startled, Boba jumped to his feet. The sand snake yelped in alarm and slithered away in a panic.

*The same one?* Boba wondered.

It didn't matter. What mattered was that his job was done, for now. His father was buried. The little grave with the *JF* on it was proof of that.

Looking at it, Boba realized how much he was going to miss the father who had protected him, guided him, watched over him—and loved him. Now he was alone, all alone.

And for the first time, and for a long time, he wept.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

It was time to think clearly, time to make plans. Time to swing into action.

*First things first*, Jango Fett always said.

First was taking care of the Mandalorian battle armor: the suit, the helmet, the jet-pack, and all the weaponry. *It will be yours someday*, his father had said.

But for now, Boba was too small to wear it or even carry it around. So he cleaned it, then hid it in a small cave under a cliff. He would reclaim it later.

Second was the black book his father had left him; or rather, the message unit that was not-a-book.

*It will tell you what you need to know*.

Boba had to get back into the apartment to get it. That presented a problem, given the chaos created by the battle that had spread from the arena. He had been confined to quarters by his father, which meant that his retinal print might not open the door.

Boba got the battle helmet out of the cave to bring with him, just in case. Since Jango almost always wore it, it would contain unlocking codes.

## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

The next problem was getting into the stalagmite city. *I can do it*, he thought, hearing the crash of broken droid parts being dumped below the mesa.

First load of the morning.

*So far so good*, thought Boba as he rode the scoop through the underground passage. Dad would be proud.

He felt a sad thought approaching but he waved it away. There would be time for all that later. For now, the best way to honor his father was to learn and live by Jango Fett's code.

That would take some doing, but it would be worth it. It had been Jango's plan for his son. Now it was Boba's plan for himself.

Carrying the battle helmet, Boba ran up the long stairs toward the apartment. He passed only two or three Geonosians, and they hardly noticed him.

There are certain advantages to being ten. One is that no one ever thinks you are doing anything serious.

The door clicked open as soon as he touched it. The apartment was almost empty. Jango Fett had always traveled light. Boba looked for the black book in the box where he kept his few clothes and old toys.

It wasn't there.

Suddenly, he remembered his last trip to the library in Tipoca City. He realized, with horror, what he had done. He had gotten the black book mixed up with his library books. It looked just like a book, after all. He had returned it with them!

*That's* why Whrr had tried to call him back. But Boba had been in too much of a hurry to listen.

The information Boba needed was on Kamino!

Boba threw a few clothes and the battle helmet into his father's flight bag. Trying not to be noticed, he made his way along the vast halls of the stalagmite city, toward the landing pad where *Slave I* was parked.

## Terry Bisson

He had learned that the best way not to be noticed was not to worry about being noticed. That was easy. He had something else to worry about.

Could he fly the ship alone, without his father watching over his shoulder?

There was only one way to find out.

Boba hurried on.

There was a guard at the door to the landing pad. Even though the Jedi had taken over the planet, the Geonosians were still guarding their property.

It was easy enough to slip past the guard while he was busy shooting the breeze with another Geonosian.

Or so Boba thought.

“Where are you going?” The guard blocked the door with his blaster.

“My dad,” Boba said. He held up the flight bag. “He told me to put this into the ship for him.”

“Which one?”

Boba pointed to *Slave I*. It was the smallest ship on the landing pad. Its scarred and pitted surface belied its great speed and maneuverability.

“Okay, okay,” said the guard, turning back to his friend and his gossip. “But you only get five minutes. Then I’m running you off.”

There was no time to check to see if *Slave I* was loaded and fueled. Jango had schooled Boba in all the flight checks, but he had also let him know that there are times when they had to be overlooked. Times when one had to trust to luck.

Boba hurried. The guard might come looking for him at any moment now.

Once he was in the cockpit, Boba pulled the helmet over his head and sat on the flight bag. To an outside observer, he looked like an adult. He hoped.



## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

He kept his fingers crossed as he started the engines and engaged the drive, just as he had been taught.

So far so good. The guard at the door even flipped him a lazy “good-bye” wave as Boba lifted *Slave I* off the platform and soared into the cloudless sky of Geonosis.

The ship felt familiar, almost like home. Boba was thankful for all the time he had spent practicing, and even pretending. Pretending is a kind of practicing.

The fuel was low, but sufficient to get him to Kamino. He was on his way. *Wish Dad were here to see me*, he thought. *I know he would be proud.*

That thought, instead of making Boba happy, brought a sudden sadness. He tried to shake it off.

He had other things to worry about.

Like the blip in his rear viewscreen.

It was a Jedi starfighter, on his tail.

*The Jedi must have left him behind to watch for stragglers*, Boba thought. *Is he here to follow me, to force me down, or to blast me out of the sky?*

Boba wasn't about to find out.

He knew he couldn't outrun the starfighter. And since he barely knew *Slave I*'s weaponry, he couldn't outfight him. That left only one option.

He had to outsmart him.

Instead of heading for space, Boba dove into the canyons and mesas that surrounded the stalagmite city. Using all the maneuverability of the craft, he sliced through the narrow canyons, turning right, then left, as fast as he could.

The starfighter was gaining. But that was okay. That was part of Boba's plan.

He remembered a trick his dad had told him about. A trick that had been used on Jango Fett once, and once only. (No trick ever worked on Jango Fett twice.)

## Terry Bisson

Boba slowed where the canyon forked, left and right. He fired a missile at the canyon wall on the right, then turned left and landed on a narrow ledge under the shelter of a cliff.

Boba shut off his engines and waited. And waited.

If the trick worked the Jedi starfighter would see the marks of the explosion of the wall, and turn back. If it didn't...

If it didn't, the starfighter would appear around the corner, lasers blazing. Or call for backup, and the sky would fill with starfighters. Or...

Finally, Boba quit waiting and restarted his engines. The trick had worked. The Jedi starfighter had seen the explosion and turned back.

Boba grinned with satisfaction as he took off again. *He thought I hit the wall!*

Boba pushed *Slave I* up into the rings and beyond. He had never been alone in space before.

He had felt alone on the planet after his father's death, and particularly after burying him. But this was different. There is alone and there is *alone*.

There is no place more lonely than the vacuum of space. Because space is No Place.

In space, there is only Not. Zero. Absence. And the absence of absence...

Welcome to 'The Big Isn't.

Boba shivered at the thought of the emptiness around him—then pushed the thought aside. He had no time for The Big Isn't. He thought of his father and his code: *A bounty hunter never gets distracted by the big picture. He knows it's the little things that count.*

Boba had a job to do. He had to find the black book.

Boba slipped into high orbit, above the rings.

Geonosis below looked almost peaceful. It was hard to believe it had just seen the fierce fighting that had killed his father—and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of others.

## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

It was a beautiful sight, but Boba didn't intend to spend time enjoying the view. He was already preparing the ship for a hyperspace jump.

For a return, this was a simple process. Since Kamino was the last place *Slave I* had been, all Boba had to do was reverse the coordinates on the navcomputer.

The ship would take care of the rest.

So he did.

And so did it.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

In hyperspace, all sectors of the galaxy are connected. Near is far and far is near.

The ship was falling into a hole. No, out of a hole.

Boba was back in “normal” space.

He was floating in orbit around what looked like a ball of clouds stitched together with lightning.

Stormy Kamino!

Home. Or as much of a home as Boba Fett had ever known.

Boba rubbed his eyes, stretched, and put *Slave I* into descent trajectory. Gray clouds whipped past like torn flags. Lightning flashed on all sides; thunder boomed. As the little starship slowed below supersonic speed, rain splattered the cockpit’s transparisteel.

Boba adjusted his speed and circled down slowly toward the lights of Tipoca City. He had watched his father do it several times, but this was his first time at the controls.

The funny thing was, he didn’t feel alone. It was almost as if Jango Fett were right there behind him. Boba could almost feel the big hand on his shoulder.

*Smooth!* He cut the engines and eased onto the landing pad with hardly a bump.

## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

The weather in Tipoca City was normal, which meant there was a big storm in progress—which was all right with Boba. He didn't want to be noticed.

He had worn the battle helmet, so that anyone watching *Slave I* landing would think there was an adult at the controls. But he needn't have bothered.

The landing pad was deserted. There was no one around.

Boba threw on a poncho and scrambled out of the cockpit, after setting the ship's environmental on INPUT to take on air and water, both plentiful on Kamino.

Especially water—it was pouring rain!

The little library at the end of the street corridor was dark. Boba banged on the door.

"Whrr, are you there?"

Was he too late? Or too early? Boba was warp-lagged from hyperspace, and he realized he had no idea what time it was in Tipoca City.

"Whrr, please. Open up!"

The light behind the slot came on.

Boba wished the door would open so that he could go in, out of the rain, but the library was only a branch.

An awning slid out, though, to protect him from the rain. And he heard the familiar whirring and clicking inside.

"Whrr, it's me."

"Boba? You're back! Where have you been? What happened?"

A short question with a long answer. Boba told Whrr the whole story, from the time he and his father had left the planet in a hurry, to the horrible scene in the arena, where he had seen his father killed.

"Oh, Boba, that's terrible. You are an orphan, at only ten. Do you have enough to eat? Do you have any money?"

"Not exactly," said Boba. "A few crackers. An extra pair of socks."

## Terry Bisson

“HMMMMMM,” whirred Whrr.

“I’ll be okay,” said Boba. “But I have to get something my father left with me. By accident I left it with you.”

“A book?”

“Yes! You remember! It looks like a book, anyway. It’s black, with nothing on the cover. I returned it by mistake, with the last books I brought back right before I left.”

“I will be right back.”

There was a whir and a click, a clank and a clatter. Soon Whrr was back—with good news!

“Here you are,” he said, passing the black book through the slot. “But there is a fine, you know.”

“A what!?”

“There’s money due on this book. Quite a bit.”

“It’s not even really a book. Besides, I didn’t check it out. It’s *mine*! I left it with you.”

“Exactly,” said Whrr. “Which means the library owes you, let’s see, two hundred and fifty credits.”

“That’s impossible—” Boba began.

“Sorry,” said Whrr, passing the money through the slot. “A fine is a fine and must be paid. Now go on about your business, Boba, and good luck. Come and see me sometime. If you’re ever around.”

*I get it, Boba thought. I’m a little slow, but I get it.*

“Thank you, my friend,” he said. “Someday I will come back to Kamino. I’ll come by and see you then, I promise.”

“Good-bye, Boba,” Whrr said through the slot. The light went off and Boba heard a strange snuffling sound.

*Must be the rain, he thought, because everybody knows that droids don’t cry.*

Boba could hardly believe his luck! Two hundred and fifty credits would buy groceries and supplies, even clothing, with some left over for fuel. This was vital—since he didn’t know how to access his father’s accounts.

## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

And he had the black book! He patted it under his poncho, where he was carrying it out of the rain.

Before heading off-planet, Boba wanted to make one stop.

He wanted one last look at the apartment where he and his father had lived, where he had spent the first ten years of his life (although, of course, he didn't remember most of it).

Fortunately, it was on the way back to the landing pad.

As Boba rode up in the turbolift, he wondered about the locks. Had they been changed? Would they still recognize his finger and retinal prints?

He never found out. The door was wide open.

The apartment was dark. It was spooky. It no longer felt like home at all.

Boba closed the door and was just about to turn on the lights when he heard a voice behind him.

"Jango."

It was Taun We.

Boba could barely see her in the dim light from the window. She was sitting on the floor with her long legs folded up out of sight under her long body.

"I saw *Slave I* come in," she said.

Boba crossed the room and stood in front of her.

Taun We looked up, startled. "Boba!? Is that you? Where's your father?"

Boba had always regarded Taun We as a friend. So he sat down and told her.

"You poor child," she said, but her words were cold and mechanical. Boba realized she wasn't such a friend after all.

"What were you about to tell my father?" he asked.

"The Jedi," she said. "They came and took the clone army, after you and your father left. They also wanted to question Jango Fett further. Now that he is dead, they will want you."

"My father hated the Jedi."

"I have no feelings for the Jedi," said Taun We. "Of course, we Kaminoans have few feelings for anything. It is not in our

## Terry Bisson

nature. But fairness requires that I tell you that they are after you. Just as I have told them that *Slave I* has landed in Tipoca City, and that you and your father would probably be coming here.”

“You did *what*?”

“I must be fair to all,” said Taun We. “It is in my nature.”

“Thanks a lot!” Boba said, heading for the door. He didn’t bother to shut it after him. He couldn’t believe Taun We had betrayed him to the Jedi. And he had thought she was a friend. Then he remembered his father’s code: *No friends, no enemies. Only allies and adversaries.*

*But what about Wbrr?* he thought as he pressed the button for the turbolift. *Wasn’t Wbrr a friend?* It was all too confusing to think about!

Boba was still lost in thought when the turbolift arrived. Then the door slid open, and—

It was a Jedi. A woman, young and tall.

Boba ducked aside and let her walk past. He kept calm, kept walking.

“Siri? You’re too late,” said Taun We from inside the apartment.

“You bet I’m gone!” said Boba as he opened the garbage chute and dove in. He closed his eyes and held his breath as he fell—down, down, down....

It wasn’t the fall he feared, it was the landing. The trash pile at the bottom would either be hard or...

OOOMPH!

Soft! Luckily, it was all old clothes and paper.

Boba was surprised to find himself grinning as he brushed himself off and ran out the door, toward the safety of *Slave I*—and flight!



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

One good thing about stormy Kamino—there are lots of electrical disturbances to cover your tracks, even from radar.

Boba Fett knew that once he had lifted off the landing pad, he would be hard to follow. He buried *Slave I* in the thick, gray clouds, changed course a few times just to be sure, then punched up through the atmosphere into the quiet of space, and a long, slow orbit.

Back into 'The Big Isn't.

At last it was time to check the black book. The message that his father had promised would guide him after he was gone.

He grasped the cover tightly, prepared to pull hard. But the cover opened easily. Instead of pages and print, Boba saw a screen.

It was just as Jango had said. It was not a book at all, but a message screen. An image was coming into focus, a planet...

No, a face. Becoming clearer.

Boba's father's face.

It was dim but it was him. Jango Fett's eyes were wide open. He looked sad, though; sadder than ever.

"Boba."

"Father!"

## Terry Bisson

"Listen up, Boba. You are only seeing this because I am gone. Because you are on your own. Alone."

Boba didn't have to be told that. He was feeling very alone.

"That is the way. All things must end. Even a parent's love, and I am even more than a parent to you. Remember me, and remember that I loved you."

"I will, Father," Boba whispered, even though he knew his father could not hear. "I will never forget you."

"There are three things you need, now that I am gone. I can only point you toward them. These three things you must seek and find on your own."

*On your own.* The words had a cold, familiar sound.

"The first is self-sufficiency. For this you must find Tyranus to access the credits I've put aside for you. The second is knowledge. For knowledge you must find Jabba. He will not give it; you must take it. The third and the most important is power. You will find it all around you, in many forms. But beware, sometimes it is dangerous. And one last thing, Boba..."

"Yes, Father! Anything!"

"Hold onto the book. Keep it close to you. Open it when you need it. It will guide you when you read it. It is not a story but a Way. Follow this Way and you will be a great bounty hunter someday. I was sure of it when I was alive, and I am sure of it still..."

The picture was fading. "Father!"

The screen was blank. Jango Fett was gone.

Boba closed the black book. The cover sealed with a soft click.

Wow.

Boba didn't know whether to smile or cry, so he did both, while he sat with the black book on his lap. It was just a message screen, just a recording. But to him it was something very precious. It was his only connection with his father.

It was home and family.

## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

He felt less alone.

Boba gave the black book a little pat and slipped it into the flight bag for later.

Then he stretched, and looked around.

*Slave I* was in high orbit. The planet Kamino was covered with storms far below. It looked like a marble made of mud and snow. On all sides, above and below, the stars beckoned.

Boba scanned through *Slave I*'s energy and environmental systems. Enough for one more hyperspace jump. Then he would have to refuel and refit.

Boba leaned back and planned his next step.

*First things first*, Jango always said. And according to Jango, or Jango's memory, Boba's first task was to find Tyranus. The Count. The man for whom Jango had created the clone army.

Boba had seen him in person, for the first time, on Geonosis. But he was sure that Tyranus had fled in the chaos of the battle in the arena. He didn't seem like the sort who would submit to being captured by the Jedi.

Where would he have gone?

Boba closed his eyes and remembered his father's voice, talking to the Jedi in Tipoca City: "I was recruited by a man called Tyranus on one of the moons of Bogden...."

The moons of Bogden. That was a start.

Boba did a search in the ship's database. Bogden was a swampy, uninhabited planet in a far sector, surrounded by "numerous tiny satellites."

The moons of Bogden...

Boba punched in the coordinates. Then he hit the hyperdrive switch, and hoped for the best.

The stars started to dance as hyperspace wrinkled around the starship. Boba leaned back and crossed his fingers for luck.

"Here goes, Dad," he breathed as he closed his eyes. "I'll do my best to make you proud of me."

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Even though Boba had looked up Bogden in the database, he wasn't prepared for what he found when *Slave I* came out of hyperspace. "Numerous satellites" indeed!

He was orbiting what looked like a handful of pebbles someone had tossed into the air.

Bogden was a small, gray planet, surrounded by a swarm of tiny moons. Boba counted nineteen before he quit. It was hard to keep them straight. They were all shapes and sizes. The smallest was barely big enough for a ship to land on, while the largest had room for mountains, a city or two, and even a dry sea.

Day and night were erratic on these tiny circling worlds. Some were in darkness, some in light. Several had atmospheres; most did not. Boba scanned them all, looking for a city with a spaceport; or at least a town with a spaceport; or at least a town.

Many of the moons seemed uninhabited. Boba rejected one pear-shaped lump that oozed volcanic fumes, and another that was covered from pole to pole with gravestones. He decided against one that was covered in ivy that looked carnivorous. He passed on one that was all ice and one that was all ash and smoldering embers.

Finally Boba located a moon that was roughly spherical, half in light and half in darkness. At least it looked occupied.

## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

He aimed for the largest cluster of lights he could find. The atmosphere was thin and shallow, and soon *Slave I* was in an approach trajectory over what looked like a small city scattered through several rocky valleys.

The ID-scan gave the moon's name as Bogg 4.

Boba aimed for a wedge of lights that looked like a landing pad. He clicked *Slave I* out of auto and began to set her down.

Smoothly and easily, and then...

*Whoa!* Something was rocking the ship, almost like a windstorm.

Boba fought the controls, trying to slow the descent.

Later he remembered a joke that went, "It wasn't the fall that was bad. It was just the last centimeter."

So it was with Boba. He made a perfect landing except for the very last part.

*CRUNCH!*

*Slave I* was tipped over on its side. Boba tried to right it, but it wouldn't move. According to his damage control panel, he had bent one of the landing struts.

At least no one was watching. The landing pad seemed deserted. Boba got out of the cockpit to survey the damage.

He felt dizzy. It looked bad. Two struts were good but the third was bent almost double.

He had no idea how to fix it. He got the flight bag down from the cockpit and looked through it for a repair manual. But there was only the black book his father had left him.

Boba pulled the black book out of the flight bag. Maybe there would be something in it that he could use. If he ever needed it, it was now!

The book opened easily. On the screen inside were two lines, looking like something out of Jango Fett's code:

*Never tell the whole truth in a trade.*

*A favor is an investment.*

## Terry Bisson

*Darn! Nothing about landing gear,* Boba thought, closing the book.

He was putting it back into the flight bag when he heard a high-pitched voice behind him: “Whose ship?”

Boba turned.

A small humanoid was approaching. He had beady eyes, a long snout, and narrow, hooved legs. Boba recognized him by his chin beard and purple turban as a H’drachi from the planet M’Haeli. But modified: His right arm had been replaced with a multipurpose tool extension.

He wore coveralls with words stitched over the pocket:

HONEST GJON  
STARSHIP SERVICE  
“we will warp you”

“My ship,” Boba said. Then he remembered that he was just ten, and looked it. “I mean—it’s my father’s.”

“And where might this father of yours be?” asked the H’drachi.

“Unavailable at the moment,” said Boba. “But you can talk to me.”

“Honest Gjon at your service,” said the H’drachi. “This is my landing pad. Which means you owe me a landing fee. And it looks like you may need repairs as well.”

“Looks like it,” Boba admitted. Still feeling dizzy, he checked in his pocket for the credits Whrr had given him. He had planned to spend them on food and fuel. But now...

“How much to fix a strut?” he asked.

“How much you got?” asked Honest Gjon.

Boba was just about to say two hundred and fifty credits, when he remembered the black book: *Never tell the whole truth in a trade.* “Two hundred credits,” he said.

Honest Gjon smiled at him. “My my, what a coincidence. That’s exactly how much it costs.”

## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

*So maybe the book helps with repairs after all*, Boba thought as he gave Honest Gjon two hundred credits. He still had fifty for himself.

Plus, as a courtesy, the H'drachi agreed to waive the landing fee.

Boba gave Honest Gjon the access codes to *Slave I* and headed toward the lights of the little town. As soon as he started walking, he understood why the landing had been so difficult. Something was shaking Bogg 4. He had hardly gone ten steps before he ended up in a ditch.

He scrambled to his feet—then fell to his knees again. He felt dizzier than ever. It was as if the ground were rocking under his feet—and yet everything looked stable.

The rocks stayed stationary. The ground didn't move.

Boba stood up again, carefully. He took a step, then another. So far so good. The dizziness came and went, and, finally, Boba realized what it was that felt so strange.

It was the gravity itself! It was strong one moment, weak the next; now tilting him forward, now back. It came and went in waves.

Boba started off again, uneasily, holding onto a stone wall that ran along the road. By the time he got to the edge of the town, he was walking in a more or less straight line.

Or so he thought.

"I see you're a newcomer," said a voice from behind him. "A newcomer, yes."

Boba turned and saw a skinny male in a long black coat. He looked almost human except that he had white feathers instead of hair on his head, and his long fingers were slightly webbed. His face had a pinched, worried look, as if it had been shrunk.

"I can tell by your walk," said the being in the long black coat. "By your walk, yes."

"So what?" Boba said. The dizziness was making him sick to his stomach, and he wasn't feeling too friendly. "And why does the gravity here come and go like the wind?"

## Terry Bisson

“Why, you have it exactly,” said the man, or whatever he was. “It’s the moons crisscrossing, now cancelling one another, now doubling their pull. It makes walking hard. That’s why we locals prefer to soar, yes.”

Boba looked for wings under the long coat, but he didn’t see any. “You are a native, then, of this world?”

“Bogg 4? No. Of all the moons, of all the moons, yes. Say, you’re pretty good, kid. Pretty good, yes.”

“Huh?”

“At the walking. You’ve almost got it down, yes.”

They introduced themselves to each other and walked together into the town.

Aia (for that was his name) explained to Boba that the moons of Bogden were a kind of outlaw heaven, where no warrants were served and no questions were asked.

“What does that mean?” Boba asked.

“It means that no one wonders why a ten-year-old boy is wandering around on his own. No one, yes.”

And it was true. Boba was even more invisible here on Bogg 4 than he had been on Kamino or Geonosis. The streets in the town were crowded with creatures from every corner of the galaxy, all walking with the same rolling gait, and none paying the slightest attention to Boba and his companion.

The gravity came and went in waves as the moons overhead (and unseen “below”) slid in and out and around one another, sometimes dark, sometimes bright. Boba was still dizzy. But he was getting used to it.

“So tell me,” said Aia. “Why are you here, yes?”

“A short visit,” said Boba cautiously. He wasn’t sure who he could trust and who he couldn’t. “I’m looking for a certain man who hired a certain bounty hunter.”

“Lots of bounty hunters on Bogg 4,” said Aia. “Dangerous characters, yes. They come here to hang out and trade info. To get new jobs. They usually only associate with one another, yes.



## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

Never with their prey. You don't have a bounty on you, do you, yes?"

Boba laughed. "No way. I'm the son of a bounty hunter."

"Here, then," said Aia, stopping in front of a low tavern that fronted on the narrow street. A wooden sign said THE BONNY BOUNTY. "This is where the bounty hunters hang out, yes."

Boba looked in the window. The place was almost empty. He could see long tables, guttering candles, and a smoky fire. "I will wait here, then," said Boba, "while my ship is being repaired by Honest Gjon."

"Honest Gjon?" said Aia. "Oh dear, yes."

"Is something wrong?"

"I mean, no, nothing. Never mind. I'll leave you here, yes."

"You're not coming in?" Boba asked. Aia was his only guide. The last thing he wanted was to be alone in this strange place.

"No, my, uh...religion forbids it, yes."

"Religion, my reptilian foot!" Suddenly two figures were standing in the open door of the Bonny Bounty. "He's not coming in because he's a thief!" said one. "And he knows that we know it!" said the other.

On the right was a birdlike humanoid with leathery skin and a broad beak. Boba recognized him as a Diollan. On the left was a green and reptilian Rodian. Boba knew that members of both species often became bounty hunters.

"This man is wanted for picking pockets!" the Diollan said.

"He stole from me, too," said the Rodian.

They grabbed Aia, each taking one of his skinny arms. "Oh, no, yes, no!" cried Aia, excitedly. He twisted and turned but couldn't get free.

Boba thought of the black book: *A favor is an investment*. Maybe if he did Aia a favor, it would pay off. At least he would have a guide. "How much does he owe you?"

"Twenty credits," said the Diollan. "Same here," said the Rodian.

## Terry Bisson

“Here.” Boba counted out forty credits, twenty for each. That left him ten. He wondered if it would be enough to buy something to eat.

The Rodian and the Diollan let go of Aia while they counted their money. As soon as his arms were free, Aia opened his black coat like a kite, bent his knees—

And jumped. Straight up. He soared up, over the rooftop, and out of sight.

Boba watched, dismayed. There went his investment.

The Rodian and the Diollan barely noticed. They turned and went back inside the tavern.

Boba followed them. Surely they owed him something. He had done them a favor, after all, by giving them their money back. “Maybe you can help me,” he said. “Are you bounty hunters?”

“Sure are,” said the Rodian, with a laugh. “Are you bounty?”

“I am Jango Fett’s son,” said Boba. “Perhaps you knew him?”

The Diollan and the Rodian both looked at Boba with new interest. They took him to a table and signaled for the innkeeper, who brought food and tea. The tea was bitter but it made Boba feel less dizzy.

In fact, the more he drank the less dizzy he felt.

“We knew your father,” the Rodian said.

“A great bounty hunter and a great man,” said the Diollan.

Boba told them the whole story of how his father had died and everything that had happened since. He hoped he could trust them because they were his dad’s colleagues.

Somehow, talking about his father’s death made Boba feel better. It made it seem less like a tragedy and more like a story. Boba wondered if that was why people told stories—to get over them.

“My father mentioned a client,” Boba said. “I thought I might find him here.”

“His name?”

## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

“Count, uh...” Boba suddenly remembered that Tyranus was a name no one was supposed to know. “Count Dooku,” he said, using the name the Count had used on Geonosis.

“Dooku?” said the Diollan.

“Not here!” said the Rodian.

“You must go to—Coruscant!” they both said together.

“Are you sure?” Boba asked, confused. Coruscant was the planet where the Republic and the Jedi had their headquarters. Why would Tyranus be there?

“Yes, yes, absolutely sure!” said the Rodian.

“Positively. Go to the Golden Cuff tavern in Lower Coruscant,” said the Diollan.

“Tell the bartender who you are looking for,” they both said together. “He’ll know immediately what to do!”

“Thanks!” said Boba. He tried to pay his bill but the bounty hunters insisted on treating him. Boba thanked them again and headed back to the landing pad where he had left his starship with Honest Gjon.

As soon as he had left, the Diollan and the Rodian turned to each other and grinned.

“That’s the best kind of bounty,” said the one.

“The kind that delivers itself and saves us the fuel...*and* the trouble!” said the other.

The tea was wearing off, Boba could tell, as he headed back for Honest Gjon’s landing pad. He felt dizzy again. Not as dizzy as before, but a little bit.

The moons of Bogden were wheeling across the sky. Some were small, some were large; some were dark, and some were bright.

Boba could hardly believe his luck. He had picked the right moon, Bogg 4. He had found the right bounty hunters, the Diollan and the Rodian. And on his very first try, he had located Tyranus. He had even eaten dinner, and it hadn’t cost a credit!

## **Terry Bisson**

*A favor is an investment.* He had meant to do the favor for Aia. Instead he had done it for the bounty hunters, and it had paid off.

Now all he had to do was get in his starship and go to Coruscant.

There was only one problem. The landing pad was empty.

*Slave I* was gone.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Boba sat down on the ground, under the wheeling, spinning Bogden moons. He was dizzy again. The tea had worn off completely.

His starship was gone. So was the black book that contained Jango Fett's code. So was his father's battle helmet—his legacy.

Even his money was gone, except for ten credits.

Gone, all gone. How could he have been such a fool? How could he have let his father's memory down? How could he have trusted Honest Gjon? He put his head in his hands and moaned in dismay and self-disgust.

Then he heard a clucking sound. "Tut, tut, yes."

It was Aia. "I was afraid of this," the skinny moon-being said. "That's why I ran back. But I was too late. That Honest Gjon is a crook, yes."

"So are you," Boba pointed out. "You steal things."

"Only my fingers steal," said Aia, holding up both webbed hands. "And only what I need, yes. To prove it, I will help you find Honest Gjon. Not so honest, yes."

Boba felt a glimmer of hope. "Where did he go?"

"His shop. He tears ships down for parts. So they can't be traced, yes."

## Terry Bisson

"Then we must hurry," said Boba, jumping to his feet. "Before he begins to tear *Slave I* apart. Where is this shop of his?"

Aia pointed straight up, toward a jagged, spinning moon.

"Oh, no!" Boba sat back down. "He has taken it to another world."

"Yes, of course. He thinks you can't follow, yes."

"But he's right! I can't!"

"But you can," said Aia. "Come. Come with me, yes." And he took Boba's hand and pulled him to his feet.

"If you were any older or any bigger, this would be a problem, yes," said Aia as he led Boba up the path. "As it is, we may just make it, yes."

"Make what?" The path twisted and turned up a rocky hill overlooking the landing pad.

"You will see, yes."

Boba saw—and didn't like what he saw.

The path ended at a cliff.

Boba gripped Aia's big hand and leaned out, looked up, looked down. Above, he saw darkness, a few moons, and many stars. Below, he saw only darkness.

He was dizzy again.

"The gravity waves rise and fall with the moons, yes," said Aia. "If you get high enough, and if you know what you are doing, you can ride them. Like a bird on the wind, yes."

All of a sudden, Boba got it. And he didn't like it.

He backed away from the edge of the cliff, but not fast enough. Aia was already stepping off into thin air—and pulling Boba with him.

Boba was falling.

Then he wasn't.

He was rising, soaring, slowly at first and then faster, faster, faster. Rising up through the air.

## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

“You have to ride the vectors, yes,” said Aia, whose coat was spread wide like a kite, like wings. He squeezed Boba’s hand. “When one vector gives out, we cross to another, yes.”

*Let’s hope so,* thought Boba.

Aia pulled Boba with him. They plummeted down, then started to rise again.

They were heavy one moment, weightless the next.

Boba ignored the lump rising in his throat for as long as he could.

Then he lost it.

“Yu-ck!” said Aia. “If I had known you were going to do that...I would have...yes...”

“Sorry,” said Boba.

He was feeling less dizzy. The higher they soared, the easier it got. All Boba had to do was hang on to Aia’s hand and follow. Other figures darted in and out of the clouds. All of them were small like Aia.

Aia waved at them.

“We are the couriers, yes,” he said to Boba. “We are the only ones light enough to travel from world to world. You too, yes. As long as you stay with me.”

*Don’t worry,* Boba thought, squeezing Aia’s hand. *I’m sticking with you!*

It was getting cold. Boba looked down. He immediately wished he hadn’t.

Bogg 4 was a tiny lump of stone and dust, far away. The stars were too bright. It was hard to breathe.

*We’re almost in space!* Boba thought. *We have soared too high!*

“There, Bogg 11, yes,” said Aia, pointing up ahead to where a smaller, darker moon was about to cross Bogg 4’s orbit. Gravity was pulling at both moons, tangling their clouds together in long streams, like seaweed.

“The foam is where the atmospheres brush one another,” Aia said. “That is where we make the jump, yes.”

## Terry Bisson

“And if we miss...”

“Space is cold,” said Aia. “Eternity is cold. Hang on, hold your breath, yes!”

Boba held his breath. But he couldn’t hold on.

His fingers were numb and stiff with cold. He felt Aia’s hand slipping away.

“No!” cried Boba silently, since there was no air with which to shout or scream.

No air to breathe.

He closed his eyes. He was spinning, weightless, drifting away into The Big Isn’t. The nothingness of space. Of death.

*Here I come, Dad*, he thought. It was almost a peaceful feeling....

Then he felt gravity pulling at him like fingers, gently. Slowing his spin. Pulling him down.

Boba could hold his breath no longer. He gulped, expecting the cold rip of vacuum in his lungs.

Instead, he tasted air. It was hardly sweet but it tasted great to Boba.

He opened his eyes.

Aia had him by the hand again.

They were soaring in the sky of a different world. A smaller, smokier world.

“Bogg 11, yes,” said Aia.

They circled down toward Bogg 11 in long loops. Boba saw *Slave I* parked in a rocky little valley, surrounded by piles of spaceship parts.

“Luckily he’s just getting started,” Aia said. “We made it, yes.”

They landed on the side of a small, steep hill. Boba fell and rolled to a stop. He got up, dusted himself off, and started running down a rocky path, toward *Slave I*.

Honest Gjon saw them coming and stared.

“What if he won’t give it back?” Boba asked. He picked up a rock. He wished he had a blaster.



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“Don’t be silly,” said Aia. “Put down the rock. Thieves have honor, yes?”

Yes. It seemed so. Sort of, anyway.

“Can’t blame a guy for trying!” said Honest Gjon, throwing up his hands. The bearded H’drachi’s smile seemed genuine.

Boba shook his head in exasperation and looked into the cockpit. The flight bag was still there. The battle helmet and the black book were inside it. Maybe there was honor among thieves after all.

Boba tried the book, and it opened.

*Money is power.*

*Not much help*, Boba thought, *since I don’t have any*. He closed the book and put it back into the flight bag.

Honest Gjon was watching Boba’s every move. “What does it say?”

“It says you’re supposed to give me my money back.”

“No way!” said Honest Gjon. “I fixed your strut, didn’t I?”

“He did, yes,” said Aia.

“Can’t blame a guy for trying,” said Boba.

They all shared a laugh.

But while Boba laughed, he tried to think of his next move.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Boba found that he liked these outlaws of the moons of Bogden. Crime was just a game to them. They were like bounty hunters, in a way.

“Coruscant’s a dangerous place,” said Honest Gjon, when Boba told him where he was going.

“And expensive,” said Aia. “You have no money, yes?”

“I have ten credits,” said Boba. “I guess that’ll have to be enough.”

“There are ways to get money, yes,” said Aia.

“Such as?”

“Such as crime,” said Honest Gjon. “I happen to know of some money being smuggled from Bogg 2 to Bogg 9. A few fellows with a good ship and a little luck could take what they needed.”

“You could be one of those fellows, yes,” said Aia.

Boba was intrigued. *Money is power.* “You’re talking about a hijacking? A robbery?”

“An interception,” said Honest Gjon. “Not exactly a robbery, since it isn’t real money, yes. It’s counterfeit credits. They are made on Bogg 2, then sent by light-air balloons to Bogg 9 when the alignment of the moons is just right.”

## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

"The atmospheres brush together and the balloons pass from world to world," said Aia. "Like we did, yes."

"A smugglers' trick," said Honest Gjon. "And if we pick off one balloon on the way, no one will miss it."

"They will think one just got away, yes," said Aia. "Of course, catching it on the fly requires a *very* good pilot with a *very* good ship. You may be too young, yes."

"I want a third," said Boba. "When do we go?"

"In about ten minutes," said Aia. He looked at Honest Gjon and winked. "I told you he would do it, yes?"

From space, Bogg 2 looked like a dry dirt clod, spiked with mountains. Boba cruised over slowly, then put *Slave I* into a slow holding orbit just above the atmosphere.

"No lights, no electrics, no radio," said Honest Gjon. "That way we can't be seen. The trick is to try to catch the balloon as it rises. If you get close, I will hook it into the hatch."

"We should let the first one go, so they don't suspect anything, yes," said Aia. "Then grab the next one."

"Sounds like a plan," said Boba.

"Look," said Honest Gjon. "Here comes number one."

He handed Boba a viewfinder. Boba saw a red balloon rising out of a mountain valley.

He handed the viewfinder to Aia. The balloon rose swiftly in the low gravity. It streaked past, into the stormy space between the moons. A gondola hung below it, packed with bales of credits.

*Money!* thought Boba with a grin. *Money is power!* If only his father could see him now. He knew he would be proud.

"Here it comes," said Honest Gjon. The second balloon was on its way. It had an even larger gondola hanging beneath it. *Even more money*, Boba thought.

Aia tracked it with the viewfinder and then with his naked eye, while Boba operated the ship. "Back up a hair, yes. Now forward. Now up, yes. Whoa!"

## Terry Bisson

Honest Gjon opened the ramp and pulled in the balloon. "Got it!"

"Great," said Boba. "Now let's close the ramp and get out of here."

"One more," said Aia.

"I thought two was the plan," said Boba. "They will see us if we stay too long. They'll send someone up after us."

"One more can't hurt," said Honest Gjon. He held up a fistful of brand-new credit notes.

*Why not?* thought Boba. *More is better.* If the black book didn't say that, well, it should!

He pulled the ship back into place and held it steady, adjusting for the varying gravity of the spinning moons.

"Number three!" said Aia. Honest Gjon went to open the ramp.

The red balloon was getting closer and closer. Honest Gjon went down to open the ramp and pull it in. The gondola underneath it was even bigger than the one before.

More money! *More is better*, Boba thought, with a grin.

"Oooops," said Honest Gjon. "Slight problem."

"You're all under arrest for counterfeiting," said a gruff voice.

Boba turned and saw Honest Gjon in the doorway. He was not alone. Standing beside him was a trooper in a security uniform, holding a blaster.

*Oh, no!* thought Boba.

"It's not our money," said Aia. "It's all a mistake, yes. We'll give it back!"

"Who cares about the money?" said the trooper, with a cruel smile that was all teeth. "I'm officially confiscating this ship in the name of the law. It's contraband."

Boba was thinking: *No way!* Give up *Slave I*, his father's ship? But what could he do with a blaster pointed at his face?

Then he remembered a trick Jango had taught him.

"Move over, kid," said the trooper. "And put your hands up where I can see them. Now!"

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“Yes, sir.” Boba set the power on FULL AHEAD and punched in DELAY 4. Then he stood up with his hands over his head and slowly backed away from the controls. He counted silently: four, three—

The trooper grinned. “That’s better,” he said, motioning with his blaster toward the open hatch. “Now grab some air, all three of you.”

Two, one—

Boba lunged, grabbing the back of the pilot’s seat as the engines roared to life and *Slave I* suddenly sprang forward. The trooper, Aia, and Honest Gjon all flew through the air and hit the back wall in a clump.

WHACK!

THUMP!

Boba held onto the seat and threw the ship into a sharp turn. Honest Gjon and Aia grabbed the dazed trooper, one on each arm. They dragged him to the still-open hatch—and shoved him out!

Boba grimaced as he brought the ship back under control. “Murder of a security trooper. Now we’re in big trouble!”

“He’s got a parachute, yes,” said Aia.

“He’s no trooper, anyway,” said Honest Gjon. “That uniform was as counterfeit as the credits. That was a hijacking that failed.”

“We did it!” said Boba as he set the ship down on Honest Gjon’s landing pad. His heart was still pounding, but he had saved *Slave I*. And made some money, too.

“How many credits do we have?” he asked. “Let’s divide them three ways, so I can get out of here.”

“That’s the bad news, yes,” said Aia. “They all flew out the door when we shoved him out.”

“All but one,” said Honest Gjon. He handed Boba a hundred-credit note. “Take it, you deserve it all. And you’re going to need it on Coruscant.”

## Terry Bisson

Boba put the money into his pocket with the pathetic little ten. Even though he had only made a hundred credits, he felt that Jango Fett would have been proud.

He had found out what he needed to know on the moons of Bogden. He had even made a few friends (or, as Jango would have called them, allies. *No friends, no enemies. Only allies and adversaries*).

Now it was time to head for Coruscant and find Tyranus.

He shook hands with Honest Gjon, but Aia insisted on giving him a big hug. “Boba, continue your quest, yes. But take care. You are too trusting. Watch your back, yes?”

“Yes,” said Boba. “Thanks, Aia.”

They hugged again, then Boba got into *Slave I* and took off. It was only after he was in deep space, preparing to shift into hyperdrive, that he noticed that the hundred-credit note was missing from his pocket.

And so was the ten.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

In the endless, intricate web of civilized and half-civilized worlds that make up the Galactic Core, some planets are obscure and hard to find. And others are hard to miss.

Coruscant is in the second category.

The coordinates are easy to remember and even easier to punch into a starship's navigational computer:

zero zero zero.

It is here that civilization begins. At the heart of the Core Worlds. At the very center of the Known Universe.

Coruscant. The planet that is a city; the city that is a planet.

Boba awoke when *Slave I* shuddered out of hyperdrive and slid into normal space.

He shook his head to clear it of the dreams that always crowded in during hyperspace jumps.

And there it was. The legendary city planet, covered by pavements and roofs, towers and balconies, parks and artificial seas. Coruscant was one immense metropolis from pole to pole.

Not a green spot nor an open field; no wilderness, no forests, no ice caps. Coruscant was one enormous planetwide city, covered by slums and palaces, parks and plazas. It spun below in all its glory, welcoming *Slave I* as it had welcomed pilgrim and

## Terry Bisson

pirate, politician and petitioner, wanderer and wayfarer since the Republic's first beginnings millennia ago.

And now it awaited Boba Fett. An orphan seeking only to please his father's ghost.

Hopeful again at last, Boba eased *Slave I* into suborbital approach, past the big orbiting mirrors that gathered and focused the light of Coruscant's faraway sun.

The starship hit the atmosphere and began to slow. Boba descended in big looping turns, past the towers of the wealthy and powerful, past the hanging gardens, and into the commercial zones reserved for uninvited visitors. With traffic crowding in on all sides, this was a much more harrowing approach than on Kamino or the moons of Bogden. Boba's heart tightened in his chest. Would they find him here?

He felt a slight bump and let go of *Slave I's* controls. The ship was locked into autopilot, being flown "by wire" on a microbeam. It would land itself.

That was fine with Boba. He had other things to worry about. Money, for starters. He would need to pay his landing fees before he could take off again. Then there was the problem of the Jedi. If they were really after him, as Taun We had warned, they might have a warrant out on *Slave I*. He could be arrested as soon as he touched down.

He needed some guidance. Maybe the book would help. It seemed to open when he needed it, or at least when it had something to say.

He pulled it out of the flight bag. Sure enough, it opened. But the message was even more mysterious than usual:

*Watch out for things that go too well.*

*That's hardly my problem!* Boba thought. He closed the book, disgusted, and put it away. He watched nervously as the ship



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eased in toward the spaceport, slipping smoothly between the towers and under the lighted walkways and gardens of Coruscant.

*Slave I* bumped down, light and easy. No alarms went off.

Boba lowered the ramp. He scanned the landing pad, ready to run if need be.

Nobody was watching. Nobody was around.

This was Coruscant. Nobody cared about an insignificant little ship like *Slave I*. Or its insignificant little ten-year-old pilot.

Boba's first emotion on landing was relief.

His second was fear. The Jedi had eyes and ears everywhere. And especially on Coruscant. Would they find Boba before he found Tyranus?

Boba didn't fear the Jedi as much as he feared failure. Would he disgrace his father's memory by failing in his first test, the search for Tyranus—and self-sufficiency?

"Welcome to Coruscant," said a disembodied droid voice.

"Sure, whatever," muttered Boba.

Carrying his flight bag with the black book and the battle helmet, plus a few extra pairs of underwear and socks, he climbed down out of the ship. He started down the escalator toward the streets.

Boba had read enough about Coruscant to know that it was arranged in layers according to class and function.

The upper levels were for the rich and powerful. Looking up, Boba could see their towers and gardens reaching up into the clouds.

The middle levels, where he had landed, were for both business and pleasure. The streets were filled with creatures from all over the galaxy, rushing around, buying and selling, or just sightseeing.

The lower levels were said to be dangerous. They were the outlaw zones, filled with fugitives, pirates, and criminals—all the denizens of the underworld that lay beneath the Imperium.

## Terry Bisson

Boba hoped all would go well on the lower levels when he went to find the Golden Cuff. He'd had quite enough adventure, thank you. He just wanted to find Tyranus.

Boba was in luck.

The Golden Cuff was a little hole-in-the-wall on the upper layer of the lower levels, just under the lower layer of the middle levels.

It was far enough down that the light was dim and the neon signs could glow all day. But not so far down that one had to hire a posse of armed guards to cross the street.

Boba walked in through the sliding door.

The bar was deserted except for the bartender, a four-armed being who was using two of his arms to wash glasses, one to count credits, and one to wipe the bar with a wet rag. His skin was a dark crimson, and a proprietor sign named him as Nan Mercador.

Boba put his flight bag on the floor and sat on a bar stool.

"No kids allowed!" said Mercador, wringing out the rag and tossing it onto the bar. "And that means you!"

"I'm not a customer," said Boba. "I'm not looking for a drink. I'm looking for a—uh, relative. Named Dooku."

The bartender's face brightened. "Dooku!" He looked at Boba with new interest. "Dooku. Oh, yes, of course. Absolutely. He's a good friend of mine. Let me give him a call."

Mercador started punching numbers into a comm unit. "Dooku? Is that you?" he said. "Somebody here to see you." Static came up on the comm screen behind the bar, as if it were a long-distance planet-to-planet call. The bartender smiled at Boba. "How about a juice while you are waiting?"

"I don't exactly have any money," said Boba.

"It's okay," said the bartender, wiping the bar with one hand and filling a mug with two others. "It's on the house!"

The juice was cold and tasted great. Boba could hardly believe his luck. He had only been in Coruscant for an hour or so, and

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already he had met a friendly bartender who actually *knew* Tyranus (excuse me, Dooku!), and now he was drinking a free juice!

Suddenly he remembered the black book: *Watch out for things that go too well.* Could it be that—?

The static on the comm screen went away, and Boba saw two familiar faces. Neither was Tyranus. The one on the right was the Diollan; the one on the left was the Rodian. The two bounty hunters from the moons of Bogden.

“That’s him!” said the Rodian. “Grab him! You can bring him to the Jedi for the reward.” Boba tried to slide down off the stool and run. But it was too late. Strong hands grabbed his right arm.

And his left arm.

And his left leg.

And his right leg.

Nan Mercador came out from behind the bar and lifted him off the stool, into the air.

“Hey!” Boba yelled. “Let me go!”

“Not a chance,” said the bartender, holding Boba over his head. “You’re worth money!”

“This is a mistake!” Boba said.

“No mistake, kid,” said the Rodian on the comm screen.

“You’re bounty,” added the Diollan.

“The Jedi know you’re coming,” said the Diollan to Mercador.

“They will give you your share in cash,” said the Rodian.

“I should get half,” said the bartender as he started toward the door holding Boba over his head with all four arms. “I saved you both the trouble of coming here.”

“Too late for that,” said the Rodian.

“It’s already been arranged,” said the Diollan as they hung up.

The screen went black.

*Think fast*, thought Boba, squirming and kicking helplessly near the ceiling. *And if that doesn’t work, think faster!* He stopped squirming. “Don’t be a fool,” he said. “Count Dooku will pay

## Terry Bisson

twice as much as the Jedi. And you won't have to split it with anybody."

"I won't?" Nan Mercador stopped. But he didn't let go of Boba. "Are you sure?"

"Positive," said Boba. "Set me down, and I will call him myself. You can ask him."

"You must think I'm a dope," said Mercador, still holding Boba so high above his head that he almost scraped the ceiling. "Besides, you don't know his number. You asked me to find him, remember?"

"I was just testing you," said Boba, looking at the ceiling light near his left foot. It was only centimeters away. "But you don't have to believe me. You can call him yourself. The number is..."

He rattled off a string of numbers, hoping they would sound right. Apparently they did. The bartender let go of Boba's left foot and began punching them into the comm unit on the bar.

Boba was ready to move. As soon as his foot was free, he kicked the light as hard as he could.

*CRASH!* It shattered, showering glass down onto the bar, the stools, the floor....

Mercador lifted his hands to protect his head from the falling glass. Boba fell, straight down, headfirst. At the last moment he managed to twist in the air like a diver and land on his feet. He scrambled toward the door, which slid open—

And revealed two gleaming boots, blocking his way. Above them were two shapely legs. And above them—

It was a woman, holding a vicious-looking blaster. She grabbed Boba's arm with one hand. She raised the other hand and fired.

*ZZZ-AAA-PPP!*

The bartender howled with pain and sat down on the floor in the middle of the broken glass.

"It's set on stun," she said. "But one false move and it goes to kill."

## STAR WARS: The Fight to Survive

“Cool,” said Boba, looking up at his rescuer. She looked dangerous. That made her even more beautiful to him. “Who are you?” he asked.

“Aurra Sing,” she said. “But never mind that. Let’s get out of here.”

Boba didn’t have to be asked twice. He grabbed his flight bag and followed her out onto the street, toward a parked hovercraft that was idling quietly on the narrow street.

“Bounty hunters,” he explained breathlessly. “They betrayed me. I never should have trusted them!”

“Bounty hunters can always be trusted,” Aurra Sing said. “Trusted to do what they are paid to do.” She opened the door of the hovercraft. “I know, because I am a bounty hunter myself. Get in, young Boba Fett.”

“You know my name?”

“Of course. The bounty hunter always knows the bounty’s name.”

Boba backed up, ready to run.

“Get in!” Aurra Sing patted the blaster in the gleaming holster that matched her boots. “It’s very painful, even set on stun. Don’t make me try it on you.”

Boba gave up and got in. He groaned as the hovercraft lifted off. He’d thought he had been rescued. Instead, he had been captured again!

As the hovercraft rose higher and higher, winding through the towers and hanging gardens of Coruscant, Boba sat back in his seat and sulked, disgusted with himself.

*“Watch out when things go too well.” I should have known better, he thought. I will never trust anybody ever again!*

He was surprised when Aurra Sing landed the hovercraft at the spaceport, right next to *Slave I*.

“Aren’t you taking me to the Jedi?” he asked. “I thought you were a bounty hunter.”

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"I am," she said. "But I would never work for the Jedi. My client lives on another planet altogether. That's why we are taking your ship. You can fly it, can't you?"

"What if I say no?"

She patted her blaster again.

Boba opened the ramp and checked out *Slave P's* systems. To his surprise, Aurra Sing paid off the landing fees, and even tipped the droid.

"Low orbit first," she said. "Then hyperspace. And no funny business. I'm not known for my sense of humor."

"No kidding," Boba said under his breath. Then he asked, "Do you mind telling me who put out a bounty on me, and where we're going?"

"You'll find out the *who* soon enough," she said. "The *where* is an outer rim world called Raxus Prime."

"Excuse me? I must have heard you wrong. I thought you said Raxus Prime."

"You heard right."

"But—that's a seriously uninhabitable planet."

"I know. And we're late. So drop us into hyperspace, and let's go."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Boba had read about Raxus Prime, but he had never seen it, not even in pictures. Few had. Who would want to?

Raxus Prime was the most toxic planet in the galaxy. It was the dump for all the debris and detritus of a thousand civilizations.

It didn't look so bad from a distance. *Sort of like Kamino*, Boba thought, as he dropped out of hyperspace, into orbit. It was all clouds. Beautiful, swirling clouds, all tinged with scarlet, green, and yellow.

But as *Slave I* descended through the clouds, Boba saw that they were actually made of smoke and steam and toxic gas. The smell was so bad that it even penetrated the ship's systems. The stink was terrible but the colors were beautiful as *Slave I* crossed the line from the dark side of the planet into the light.

Pollution makes for great sunrises.

The smell didn't seem to bother Aurra Sing. Nothing seemed to bother her. "Fly slow and low," she said. It was the first thing she had said in hours. The entire trip from Coruscant had been silent.

That suited Boba fine. He had nothing to say to her, either. She was not his ally but his adversary.

## Terry Bisson

As *Slave I* dropped lower, Boba saw the surface of Raxus Prime for the first time. It was covered with rubble, trash, junk, and garbage, piled in huge twisted heaps and rows like grotesque mountain ranges. Rusted, busted starships, scorched weaponry, mangled machinery, gobs and stacks of glass and steel lay half buried under heaps of slag. And all of it oozed and steamed and smoked, fouling the air above and the water below.

Though it all looked dead, it was alive. Boba saw tiny brown-robed creatures scurrying through the oily wasteland. He saw birds the color of dirt, like smears against the sky. There were no cities, but every few kilometers a smokestack belching fumes marked the site of a refinery or recycling plant, run by scurrying oil-smeared droids.

“Slower, kid.”

Aurra Sing consulted a code on her wristwatch. “It should be along here somewhere. Look for a lopsided hill and a lake—there it is!”

The “hill” was a heap of foul refuse a thousand meters high. Twisted, leafless, mutant trees grew from its ravaged slopes, fed by the continual rain that oozed from the stinking clouds.

The “lake” was a pool of iridescent liquid the color of bile. Following Aurra Sing’s instructions, Boba set the ship down on a flat spot between the lake and the base of the hill.

“Don’t shut it off.”

“Huh?”

“The ship. Leave it running. I’m getting out of here. You’re staying. This is it.”

“You can’t leave me here! You can’t steal my ship!” said Boba.

“Who says? The ship is my pay,” said Aurra Sing. She opened the hatch and lowered the ramp. “There is a door in the side of the hill. As soon as I leave, it will open for you. My client is waiting for you inside. Don’t forget your flight bag.”

She tossed it out, onto the stinking, steaming “ground.” Boba ran after it. She closed the ramp behind him.



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"You can't just leave me here!" Boba yelled, banging on the hull of the ship. "I'll run away!"

"Look around—I don't think so!" she yelled back. "I'm gone. Good luck, Boba Fett. I hope you can live up to your father's reputation. He was the genuine article. Who knows, maybe someday you will be, too. I liked the way you handled that bartender."

Boba could hardly believe it. She had rescued him, then betrayed him, then robbed him, and then complimented him! And now she was about to leave him alone on the foulest planet in the galaxy. He banged on the hatch in a rage, but instead of opening, it sealed with a hiss.

He felt truly alone now. There was no one he could trust.

*Slave I's* engines whined. Boba knew that sound. He stepped back, out of the way. He watched helplessly as the starship—*his* starship!—rose into the noxious clouds and disappeared.

Once again, he felt dangerously close to tears. At the same time, he could barely breathe. Suddenly, he heard a sound behind him.

He turned. A door in the hillside was sliding open. Inside, Boba could see a brightly lighted hall, leading to a carpeted stairway.

Boba didn't wait to be invited. Coughing and gagging, he ran inside.

*Now what?* Boba thought as the door slid shut.

Before he had a chance to answer his own question, he heard a voice behind him. "Welcome to Raxus Prime, Boba Fett."

The voice was familiar. So were the lean, lined face and the hawklike eyes.

"Count Tyranus! I mean, Count Dooku!"

"You are among friends now, Boba," said the Count. "You can call me anything you please. Count will do."

"My father told me to find you," said Boba.

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"And I made sure it happened," said the Count. "I see that Aurra Sing did a superb job and delivered you here safely."

"Yes, sir," said Boba. "I mean, no, sir. You see, she stole my ship, and it's..."

The Count smiled and raised his hand. "Don't worry. Your ship is safe. Everything will be fine from now on. You must be very tired."

Boba nodded. It was true.

"Don't worry about a thing," said the Count, placing his cold hand on Boba's head. "Come, let me show you to your room. Let me carry your bag."

Boba followed him up the long stairs. The carpets were deep and soft. Who would have imagined that there was such an elegant palace on the planet of garbage? Even the air was sweet. There was only a very faint foul smell from the planet outside.

"I have big plans for you, Boba," said the Count. "Plans that would have made your father proud. But first you need to rest. You must be tired after all your travels."

Boba nodded. He had packed a lot of adventures into just a few days. The escape from the Jedi starfighter on Geonosis, the escape from the Jedi woman back on Kamino, the recovery of his ship and the robbery gone wrong on the moons of Bogden, the struggle with the bartender on Coruscant...

He had lost the ship, but he would get it back. The Count had promised, hadn't he? Something like that.

A lot of stuff for a ten-year-old, he realized. He *was* tired. But he was also confused. He knew he should be happy. He had been lucky. He had completed the first part of his quest. He had found Tyranus. Now he would find Wisdom.

So why had he felt a cold chill when the Count put his hand on top of his head?

*Probably just nerves*, Boba thought as he followed the Count up the stairs, toward his room.

And his unknown future.





# STAR WARS™

## *BOBA FETT*™

CROSSFIRE

TERRY BISSON





# CHAPTER ONE

“Hello!”

Silence.

“Hello!?”

No answer. The hallway outside his door was quiet.

Boba Fett was all alone.

That was okay. Boba was used to being alone.

Ever since he had buried his father, he had been by himself—a ten-year-old against the galaxy. He missed his father but he didn’t mind being alone. Sometimes.

Sort of.

...*whrr*...

Movement! Boba ran to a bend in the corridor. “Hey! Hey!”

...*whrrr*...

It was just a droid. A small, shoe-sized house droid, the custodial kind that dusted and cleaned continually. While other creatures bustled in other corridors of the Count’s underground lair, only the custodial droids came into this hallway.

That explained why Boba felt so isolated. But it didn’t explain why he had been brought here, and what was going to happen to him. Only the Count could do that.

The Count, a tall, thin, powerful man with a cold smile, was known as Tyranus—or Dooku, depending on whom you were

## Terry Bisson

talking to. Boba's father, Jango Fett, had left instructions that Boba was to find the Count if something happened to him.

Something *had* happened to Boba's father. He had been killed in a battle with a Jedi. Boba had buried his father on the planet Geonosis. He had gone to his home planet of Kamino only to find that it wasn't home anymore. With his father gone, there was no security. With his father gone, there was no safety. There was only the need for escape.

Boba's father had left him a book. *Find Tyrannus*, it had told him, *to access Jango's credits and find self-sufficiency*.

That suited Boba. He wanted to learn how to become a great bounty hunter like his father. To start out he'd need credits—then he'd earn more. But Boba hadn't had time to find the Count. The Count had found him first, sending a bounty hunter named Aurra Sing to capture him on Coruscant and bring him to this underground hideout on Raxus Prime. She'd taken his ship, *Slave I*, as payment. But she hadn't explained why the Count wanted Boba.

Only the Count could answer that, and Boba couldn't find him. The Count had welcomed him to this hideout—sort of—and had given him a room with a table, a chair, and a bed. Boba had immediately gone to sleep, exhausted. Now that he was awake, the Count was nowhere to be found.

"Hello?"

No answer.

Walking around, Boba had seen rooms half-empty or filled with mysterious equipment, some of it still in crates. He had heard strange sounds in the distance. Voices, many languages. He passed figures half-seen as they scuttled down dimly lit corridors, hurrying around corners.

There was something going on. But what? Clearly, the Count wanted to keep him separate from others. Boba hoped this was because the Count was going to train him, was going to employ him like he had employed Boba's father.

That was his hope.



The room Boba had been put into was painted white and lighted by glow panels set in the ceiling. Like everything he'd seen so far in the compound, it was thrown together, ramshackle. Clearly the Count had just moved in. And he might not be planning on staying for long.

Boba knew the lair was underground—he had entered through a hillside, after being dropped off by Aurra Sing—but that was all he knew. He was far from the outside world, and even farther from any place he had ever known. He was isolated. The Count controlled everything.

Boba knew he couldn't stay in the room all day. If he'd learned anything from the terrible days following his father's death, it was that he couldn't hesitate to take action. Boba kept walking down the hallway, which led to another dim hallway, the far-off voices a little closer. *How will I find my way back to my own room?* Boba wondered. The room where he had slept was where he had left his flight bag. It was his only property, the legacy from his father.

He would worry about that later. *First things first.* That was a lesson his father had taught him. First he had to find the Count and figure out what was going on.

"Hello?" Another empty room. But wait...this room was different.

It had a window.

The window overlooked a lake, surrounded by woods. A blue sky overhead was flecked with white clouds. But how could that be?

Raxus Prime was the most toxic planet in the entire galaxy. Boba had seen the skies, thick with smoke; the hillsides piled high with wreckage and garbage; the oily waters choked with debris and waste. Everything on Raxus Prime was foul and filthy. So what was this lake out the window? Had it all been cleaned up while he slept? Or had he been moved somewhere else?

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Boba crossed the room toward the window. He was just about to try to open it when he heard a stern, forceful voice behind him.

“Not allowed.”

Boba turned. Someone—or *something*—was standing in the doorway to the room, making the empty space seem suddenly filled. He was huge, his bald, reptilian head crowned with a clawlike crest. He wore a gray jumpsuit with gold braiding and buttons. His broad mouth was filled with too many big square teeth, and his tiny eyes were cold.

“*Not allowed*,” the giant in the doorway said again, this time with a stomp of his tall, heavy boots. The ground shook beneath his statement.

Boba felt a chill of fear, and remembered his father’s words: *Welcome your fear as a friend, but never show it to others*. He made his voice sound casual, almost friendly. “What’s not allowed?” he asked.

“The unpermitted,” was the terse reply. “Now come with us, young sir.”

*Us?* There was just him, just the one giant. But that was enough. “Come—where?” Boba asked.

“The Count, ready to see you. Follow us, please.”

Boba knew he had no choice. The creature wasn’t going to move until Boba did as he said.

## CHAPTER TWO

Boba followed the giant past more closed doors, to an ornately carved door at the end of a long hall.

The giant knocked, then entered to a signal Boba hadn't heard. Inside, the room was larger than the others. It had furniture, too. A desk with carved legs had a holoprojector on it. A holographic comm unit was ready for transmissions in the corner of the room.

Behind the desk was a tall picture window. The window faced a different direction than the window in the other room, but overlooked the same view, surrounded by the same woods. *What's going on?* Boba wondered.

A man in a long cloak was standing at the window, looking out. He turned when Boba entered the room. A smile as thin and as sharp as a dagger creased his long, narrow face, slicing his white beard in two. In a single glance, Boba could feel his dark presence. This was something more than strength. It was power.

"Young Boba Fett," the Count said in a sonorous voice. "I hope you slept well. I see you found the clean clothing that was left beside your bed."

Boba nodded, fingering the coarse tunic. "Yes, sir."

"And the accommodations?"

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Boba nodded again. The breakfast hadn't amounted to much, only a shuura. But he wasn't about to complain.

"Excellent," said the Count. "And I believe you have met Cydon Prax. He assists me with all things."

The hideous giant bowed and Boba bowed back. His father had taught him to spot a killer when he saw one. And Prax looked like he could easily be a killer, if pushed the wrong way. Boba felt a tinge of anger, too. Prax now stood where Boba's dad had stood before, at the Count's side.

"Prax will look after you and take care of your needs," the Count continued. "You must let him know if there is anything you desire. Anything at all."

Boba nodded. "Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." He wanted to seem agreeable—almost subservient. He wanted Prax to think of him as an obedient little kid. That way, neither Prax nor the Count would know what was really going through his head.

"Since the unfortunate death of your father, I have been pleased to take on the responsibility for your care and upbringing," said the Count. "As you no doubt know, that was Jango Fett's last and fondest wish."

*It was?* Boba thought. The Count's words were kind, but why was his voice so cold?

"I have many obligations that may, unfortunately, prevent me from giving you my total attention," continued the Count. "However, I welcome you to my quarters here on Raxus Prime. You may find them a little primitive. We are engaged in an important archaeological project here. I will expect you to respect my rules and stay out of the way."

"Yes, sir," said Boba. It was easy enough to please adults. All he had to do was nod and agree.

"Good." The Count's smile was as bright and cold as an icicle. "Cydon, leave us."

Cydon Prax gave a nod and lumbered out of the room. The Count slowly approached Boba and asked, "Have you ever heard the name Tyranus?"

Boba nodded. It was a simple question, but the Count's tone was ominous.

"Your father may have mentioned it to you in connection with his work on Kamino, developing the clone troopers. I believe I've heard you say that he and I were the same person. When you were on Geonosis, you looked at me and said, 'Isn't that Tyranus?' Do you remember that?"

"I remember," said Boba. *Where is this going?* he wondered.

"You might ask, why would someone have two names, Tyranus and Dooku?" the Count suggested mildly.

"I learned from my father not to ask too many questions," Boba said. He could see from the Count's eyes that this was the right answer.

"Excellent," said the Count. "Your father was very discreet. I believe you will be, too."

"Yes," said Boba, wanting to reassure the Count.

"A useful man, your father," said the Count. "And I see you are your father's son. I am sure that with the proper training, you will be as useful someday."

"Yes, sir," said Boba. Training! Now they were getting somewhere. "Also, my father left a message about some credits that belonged to him. He said you would give them to me."

"Ah, yes, Jango Fett's savings. I suppose, if you prove worthy...but we will discuss all that later, this evening."

"I will prove worthy!" said Boba eagerly. "I want to be a great bounty hunter like my dad."

But the Count was no longer listening. He was studying some strange images on his holomap. He had turned all of his attention away from Boba, as if Boba had never been there.

Boba heard the door open and felt a grip on his shoulder. "Come with us," said Cydon Prax.

As he was being led out the door, Boba heard the Count behind him, talking on his comm device. "Keep digging," he said in his icy voice. "Expand the search. Spare no expense. What we are looking for is more powerful than you can possibly imagine."

## CHAPTER THREE

As Boba followed Prax down the long halls, back to his lonely room, he thought of the Count's cold dismissal. *Can I trust him? Do I have a choice?* Maybe the Count wasn't going to turn out to be such a good friend after all. Jango Fett had always said that in a bounty hunter's life, there was no such thing as a friend. Boba knew this was probably true. But still he hoped...

"Stay here," said Prax, when they arrived at the room. "No wandering. Unpermitted."

Boba nodded his agreement and closed the door. His original clothes were back, clean, folded at the foot of the bed. He changed into them, glad to shed the rough tunic.

His flight bag sat on the floor beside the bed. It contained everything Boba owned—except his father's ship, *Slave I*. Boba fully intended to get it back. Meanwhile, the bag contained all his worldly possessions:

A helmet and a book.

When Boba had buried his father with his armor on Geonosis, he had kept his scarred and pitted battle helmet. It was Mandalorian. Boba took it out of the flight bag and looked at it longingly. The faceplate of the helmet was as familiar, as stern, and, in its own strange way, as loving as his father's actual features.

In fact, Boba was beginning to fear he would forget his father's face. *This* would become more familiar—this harsh visage, like a T, with an eye slit at the top.

Boba put the helmet beside him and took out the book.

The black book contained Jango Fett's final messages to his son. Sometimes they were the same, from day to day. Sometimes they changed.

The most recent message had been about the Count, credits, and self-sufficiency. Boba opened the book to see if it had changed. It had, but only a little. Today it read:

*Self-sufficiency you will learn from the Count.*

Sometimes the book wasn't much help. How was he going to learn *self-sufficiency* from the Count, who wasn't even interested in talking to him?

Boba had lots of questions. Why was the Count so cold and mistrustful? What was he digging for? But it was clear that if he wanted answers, he was going to have to find them himself—even though *wandering* was *unpermitted*, according to Prax.

He closed the book and put it back into the flight bag. It was time to explore.

Boba clenched his fist and held it in front of his face, making a vow. "Self-sufficiency means do it yourself!" he muttered. He picked up his father's helmet—it was his only possible disguise, just in case he needed one. Carefully, as quietly as possible, he opened the door....

## CHAPTER FOUR

Boba looked right.

Boba looked left.

No Cydon Prax.

Good—all clear!

He started his exploration, staying close to the wall, so he could duck out of sight if necessary. He followed the hallway to the end, then rounded a corner; then another corner—always heading toward the noises and commotion he could hear in the distance.

The halls around his room were empty, but those farther away were filled with noise and activity. Soon Boba found himself sharing the corridors. Droids of all shapes and sizes bustled about, carrying equipment in and out of the small storage rooms. Their whirrs and clicks sounded almost like speech.

There were other creatures, too. Boba saw a Geonosian warrior armed with a sonic blaster at a distance and a Nemoïdian in colorful robes, looking angry and harassed.

The whole place had a temporary, provisional air, like a construction site. There was dirt on the floor and scars on the walls, where they had been bumped and scraped. There was a sharp smell, either of the outside air or of the oil-like sweat glistening on the limbs of the busy droids.



The equipment in some of the rooms looked like it was for digging or drilling. Most of it was covered with muck, but some was bright and gleaming, as though it hadn't yet been used.

And under it all was a low hum, a constant buzz of activity. Boba heard two Nemoidians talking about "the dig" and "the harvester," but they turned a corner and were gone before he could hear more.

Boba made his way down the halls and around the corners, trying to remain as inconspicuous as possible. He had learned that it was easy for a ten-year-old to be invisible, as long as he stayed out of the way.

The droids and workers were all intent on their tasks. And none of them knew or cared who Boba was, except for Prax. All Boba had to do was avoid him.

The air in the corridor was growing colder. The toxic smell was stronger. Ahead, Boba saw a large opening to the outside. Droids and workers streamed in and out, some carrying strange-looking tools, others riding on square all-terrain vehicles.

He was trying to get a better look when he heard a familiar voice: "Give us results!"

That harsh, booming sound was familiar. Cydon Prax? Boba wasn't taking any chances. He ducked into a nearby room and flattened himself against the wall.

To his surprise, he was facing a window. The view was just like the ones he had seen earlier. The window overlooked a lake surrounded by woods, with a clear blue sky overhead.

Again, Boba wondered how such a view could exist on Raxus Prime. And why was the view exactly the same every time he saw it? How could three rooms in different places have the same view?

He approached the window and reached out to touch it. It was soft, like a plastic curtain. As soon as he touched it, the scene changed. Now he saw bright blue-green water lapping against silvery sands.

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He touched the window again.

Snow-covered peaks watching over an icy planet.

*Now I get it!* Boba thought. It was all a display, a virtual window showing a virtual scene. A series of illusions installed by the Count.

Boba touched the viewscreen one last time and saw toxic steam belching from piles of trash and slag, under a reddish, smoke-stained sky. This was the real world—Raxus Prime. The beautiful views were just fabrications.

In the distance was a tower with huge arms, moving up and down. It looked like a giant robot. Was it real, or an illusion? Boba couldn't tell. Here in the Count's lair, it was impossible to tell the truth from a lie.

Suddenly, Boba heard a distinctive set of footsteps in the hallway—the heavy tread of Prax patrolling. In the blank room, there was nowhere to hide. Boba held himself close to the wall, next to the doorway. If Prax peered in, Boba would be fine. If Prax walked inside, he'd be caught.

The footsteps came closer. Then stopped. Right outside the room. Boba held his breath. The door opened. Prax stuck his head into the room.

*The window is wrong*, Boba realized. Too late. There was no way to hide the scene of Raxus Prime.

Prax was no more than a meter away from Boba. If he turned his head, it would all be over.

For a long second, everything remained still. Then Prax grunted and pulled his head out of the room.

Boba waited a few minutes, until he was sure Prax was gone again. Then he slipped back out into the hall and headed toward the other creatures near the exit.

Boba stood to one side and looked out the giant doorway. Through the swirling mists he saw the tower he had seen through the “window.” The tower was definitely real. It was the focus of all the activity; a crude dirt road from the door to the tower's

## **STAR WARS: Crossfire**

base was crowded with vehicles, droids, and workers carrying equipment, some coming and others going out.

Boba was fascinated. This must be the Count's "dig."

What was he digging for? The Count had made it sound like something very powerful...which would make it something a bounty hunter should know about.

There was one way to find out the truth.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*When! What a stink!* The sky was dark with swirling smoke; the ground was heaped with the trash and garbage from a thousand planets. The twisted wreckage of hundreds of crashed ships stretched into the distance. The air was almost too foul to breathe.

Luckily, Boba had brought his father's battle helmet. He put it over his head as he started out on the road, toward the tower. The helmet was surprisingly light, and it made breathing easier; though it had no independent air supply, its filters removed the worst of Raxus Prime's poisons.

*Self-sufficiency*, thought Boba, *begins with the right equipment.*

The road angled up a ridge of oozing slag. Boba slogged along, his boots slipping in the soft terrain. At the top, where the road crested the ridge, he stopped to rest.

From here he could see the tower much better. It was a crane. The arms were equipped with drills and vats, which dipped deep into the muck of Raxus Prime. Lights from the top of the tower illuminated a great pit, where droids and workers toiled in and out of the vapors and the darkness.

All around were ruined walls and arches, like the remains of a great city that had been buried and forgotten, and was being dug up again.

Boba descended the ridge until he was at the edge of the enormous pit and looked down. Remote diggers and salvage droids rattled and bumped through the muck, far below. Well-armed “spider” droids stood watch at the perimeter of the pit, and Boba saw AAT tanks idling nearby, hovering off the ground. But none of them seemed interested in him.

A lot of firepower for a hole in the ground, especially on the galaxy’s garbage planet. Boba wondered again what could be so valuable, buried in the mire and muck of Raxus Prime?

As if in answer to his unspoken question, a gruff voice said, “Getting close to it, huh?”

Boba jumped. He hadn’t seen the Givin driver, who had stepped out of his drilling vehicle and walked up to stand beside him.

“Guess so,” Boba asked. He didn’t want to admit that he didn’t know what “it” was.

“About time.” The driver bit off a piece of radni root, and offered it to Boba. “Have a chew?”

Boba realized that in his helmet, he was being taken for an adult. Another advantage of his father’s legacy.

“No, thanks, I don’t chew,” he said. Then he ventured: “So that’s it—the treasure?”

“Treasure?” The Geonosian laughed and spat into the pit. “Not unless you call death a treasure. No one’s supposed to know, but the Count is after something called a Force Harvester.”

Boba had heard about the Force. The Jedi used it, his father had told him. But the Count wasn’t a Jedi...

“But don’t mind me,” he said, heading back to his mud-laden craft. “I just work here.”

## Terry Bisson

“Security check!” said a gruff, familiar voice in the near distance. Boba ducked behind a rock just as Cydon Prax strode into view.

“All systems secure?” Prax asked. “No intruders?”

“Who’d intrude on this planet?” asked the driver, swinging up into his seat. “Not exactly a resort.”

“Keep an eye open,” growled Prax. “The Count does not want anyone nosing about his digs. Got it?”

“Got it, got it,” said the driver.

*I’d better get out of here, fast!* Boba thought. Prax might recognize him, even in his helmet, because of his size. He waited until Prax was out of sight, then started back down the road.

The problem was, the road was too exposed, too narrow. Prax could come along at any moment. Boba decided to take what he hoped was a shortcut. A path veered off through the wreckage, but Boba thought he saw it emerge back by the Count’s base.

After getting off the road and rounding a few bends, Boba realized he’d already gone far. Like most shortcuts, it turned out to be the long way.

## CHAPTER SIX

It was hard going. Up one stinking slag heap, and down another.

Boba tried to keep the big tower straight behind him, and the distant light of the door ahead. That would be the shortest, fastest route back to Dooku's underground lair.

The stinking ground sucked at his boots where it was wet, and crumbled into toxic dust where it was dry.

Raxus Prime was all ruins and debris. Boba passed through forests of broken machinery and shredded wire. He climbed cliffs of soggy, discarded fabric and slid down steep mountainsides of muck. Brown steam spewed from the steep piles, while foul-smelling liquids oozed down their sides.

The helmet helped him breathe but it couldn't mask the smell of the noxious atmosphere. Still, Boba pushed on. He had no choice; he had to beat Prax back to the Count's lair. Other wise, the Count might find out he had broken his rules and gone outside. Even though Boba wasn't sure what he had discovered. The Force Harvester? What was that?

"Ugh!" Boba slipped on a particularly foul-smelling piece of refuse and slid to a stop. He was at the edge of a wide pond of bubbling, greenish-brown liquid. It looked *very* nasty. A mist rose from the surface that smelled like rotten rikknit eggs.

## Terry Bisson

Unless Boba turned around, the only way through was by way of the pond. He walked straight into the liquid—first one step, then another. The nasty goop sloshed over the tops of his boots, but what did he care? Boba was not going to let anything get in his way. A bounty hunter was not delayed by revulsion.

Boba shook the slime off his boots and trudged up another steep ridge of dripping slag. Even through his helmet, the smell was terrible. But from the top, he could see that the brightly lighted door way of the Count's lair was only a few hundred meters away. He was almost there!

There was only another pond to cross, and this one was long and narrow—just a few meters across. Boba slid down another slope slick with oozing slime, to the edge.

The pond was ringed with foul-smelling ferns. It was a brighter green than the last one, and it looked deeper. A lot deeper.

Boba summoned up his courage and stepped off the edge, into the ferns. His boots sank into the ground. He took another step and sank up to his boot tops. Boba tried to pull his left leg free; it sank even deeper.

Another step, and it was up to his knees. Boba was more than halfway across, but he was stuck. The ooze felt like hands, pulling him down deeper and deeper.

Boba tried to take a step back, but he couldn't. Instead, he slipped farther into the greenish muck. Now it was up to his waist.

He tried again to pull his legs free, but thrashing around only sank him deeper into the stinking, gluelike mud.

He quickly sank in up to his neck.

The mist was rising into his mask, and he could hardly breathe. He could feel a burning sensation in his knees and feet. It felt as if he were being dissolved by the acid gunk.

*I am being digested!*

Only the helmet allowed him to breathe, to survive. It seemed to have stopped the sinking and the digesting for some reason.



But for how long? His chin sank into the muck. In a moment his mouth and nose would be covered, too. The mask was clearly being rejected by the horrible mass...but how long would that last?

Boba searched frantically for a means of escape. He saw a coil of wire sticking out of a slag heap on the other side of the pond, but it was too far away. A stick lay closer, on the bank below the wire, but still out of reach. The reeds were all around, but they were too thin and frail to hold his weight.

Then Boba remembered: *self-sufficiency*. It meant using whatever was available.

He managed to get one arm out of the muck and grabbed the longest reed he could find, pulling it up by the roots. It felt slimy, even through his gloves. He used it like a long flexible hook to snag the wire, inching it across the mud until it was within the reach of his hand.

Yes! The wire felt plenty strong. Boba wrapped it around his hand and began to pull.

It was almost too late. His eyes were burning and he could hardly breathe. His arms were weak. He gathered all his strength and pulled....

The wire was coming loose from the slag pile. It dislodged a tiny clod, starting a small landslide down the slippery slope of slag and garbage. Then it jerked tight again. It had snagged on something.

Boba pulled again, but more carefully this time. The wire was barely caught on the edge of an old piece of machinery. If it slipped off, he was a goner.

This was his last chance. Hardly daring to breathe, he pulled himself toward the shore of the pond. One leg was free...then the other...

Boba grabbed a handful of reeds and pulled himself out of the stinking liquid, onto the slimy shore. "Whew!" Plain old slime had never felt so good before.

He was free.

## Terry Bisson

Boba blended in with the crowd of droids, warriors, and workers streaming in the wide, brightly lighted door way. No one noticed him, and Prax was nowhere to be seen.

Even the filth that covered him didn't give him away. Many of the others were filthy as well, from the dig.

Boba took off his helmet and wiped it clean. It had saved his life, that was for sure. He now realized why it was so important to his father...and why it would be important to him.

Boba joined the "dig" workers in the shower that steamed the worst of the slime off his clothes and his boots, and then dried them instantly. Now all he had to do was make it back to his room and no one would know he had been outside.

He stepped out of the shower, his clothes already dry—and grimaced in pain as a rough, strong hand gripped his shoulder.

"Come!" The voice was unmistakable. Boba opened his mouth to explain that he hadn't *meant* to break the rules, that it was all a mistake. But what was the point?

Cydon Prax wasn't listening as he dragged Boba down the corridor, toward the Count's inner sanctuary.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The Count wrinkled his finely arched nose. “We shall have to clean you up,” he said dismissively.

Boba tried to keep from shaking. He knew it was best never to show fear. He gripped his father’s helmet in his hands.

“Your father didn’t teach you very well,” said the Count. “You have been sticking your nose where it does not belong.”

“I didn’t see anything,” Boba said. He could feel the Count’s power turning steadily into wrath.

“Oh, really?” The Count was scornful. He stood behind his desk, in front of the “window” that showed a blue lake under a blue sky. Anything but the real filth of Raxus Prime.

“*Really*,” said Boba. “I just stepped outside the door. I didn’t go far.”

“Perhaps I should take on your training, after all,” said the Count. Boba felt a moment’s hope. But the hope was dashed by the Count’s next words: “If I did, the first thing I would teach you is how to lie. You are not very good at it.”

“I am sorry I broke your rules,” said Boba. *And especially sorry that I got caught.*

“Sorry?” said the Count with a smooth, cold grin. “You have broken my rules. And that is not all...”

*Not all? Wasn’t that enough?*

## Terry Bisson

"I've decided that you know too much at a time when information is a valuable commodity." He turned to Cydon Prax, who stood by the doorway. "Isn't it ironic that one small boy should be the only one who knows such a great secret?"

Prax didn't answer, of course. Boba wasn't sure what the "great secret" was that he was supposed to know about. But the Count's remark gave him an idea that he hoped just *might* save his life.

"What makes you think I'm the only one who knows?"

The Count raised his eyebrow—the most surprise Boba could imagine the Count betraying. "What do you mean?"

"Just what I said," said Boba. He tried to keep his voice calm, cool, *Jango Fett-style*. "I have already told someone else."

He had the Count's attention now...barely. "May I inquire who?" the older man asked.

"That's my secret," Boba bluffed. "And she knows who to tell if anything happens to me."

"*She?*" Boba could hear a slight undertow of uncertainty. "Might you be insinuating the bounty hunter Aurra Sing?"

Boba was making it up as he went along. "I do mean Aurra Sing," he said.

"Young fool. Are you threatening me?"

"No, sir. I simply want what is mine. My freedom—and my father's credits."

"Freedom? Credits?" The Count's eyes blazed like cold fire. "I do not bargain with children. Especially those who are a nuisance."

*I went too far!* Boba realized. His last chance was lost.

"Cydon Prax, you know what to do with him."

Boba knew it was useless to resist. He closed his eyes as Cydon Prax picked him up. Boba dropped his helmet as his arms were pinned. His father's voice came to him. *If you must die, do so with valor*. That is what Jango Fett had done, fighting to the last moment.

The memory inspired Boba. He was done with pleading and pretending. Whatever was coming, he would face it with the courage of the son of Jango Fett.

Suddenly the Count raised his hand. For the first time, Boba saw genuine concern cross his face.

“What is it, sir?” Prax asked.

“The Jedi have found us,” the Count answered.

Boba strained to hear something beyond the silence of the room. *How did the Count know?*

“Finish him off, then join me,” the Count said tersely as his hand seemed to instinctively find the curved lightsaber handle that glistened beneath his cloak.

BAR-ROOOM! An explosion shook the floor.

Quickly picking up a holopad from his desk, the Count left the room. As if on cue, a second explosion rocked the room. This one was closer. Small rocks started to fall from the ceiling.

Cydon Prax hesitated for a moment and his grip on Boba loosened just a little as he looked after his master. Boba saw his chance. He kicked out with all his strength against the nearest wall. Prax was propelled backward, into the desk. Boba’s elbows slammed into him as they landed.

“You little...”

Prax’s words were lost in a series of explosions outside. The floor pitched up like the deck of a ship being tossed by a giant wave. The door cracked and fell to the ground. The sound of blaster fire and confused voices filled the air.

Boba lunged and twisted free from Prax’s grip. He scooped up his battle helmet from the floor where he had dropped it. And then he did what his father had taught him to do whenever he was in a bad situation he didn’t expect to get any better.

He ran.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The once dim corridor was filled with light, and no wonder!

The Count's underground hideout had been blown wide open. Large parts of the roof were missing, and Boba was standing on top of a pile of smoking rubble.

He looked up. The filthy sky of Raxus Prime was even filthier than usual. It was filled with explosions, blossoming like deadly flowers.

The noise was deafening. A battle was raging. Blaster fire screamed past. The Count's automatic defense system was firing into the air, rapid-fire lasers filling the already smoky air with bursts and clouds of brightly colored smoke.

Through the clouds, Boba saw the approaching gunships. They bore the eight-spoked insignia of the Republic. The Count had been right—it was a Jedi-led attack! Republic assault ships were unloading clone troopers in their gleaming white battle armor. They fanned out in impressive military order through the slag heaps, smashing the Count's defenses.

*My brothers!* Boba thought scornfully. His father had helped create the clone troopers; the Kaminoans had used his dad's genetic material to make millions of them. So why were they fighting on the side of the hated Jedi—again?

Battle droids followed what Boba instantly recognized as GAT tanks, closing in on the clone troopers from behind—until a Jedi on a speeder-bike streaked over the horizon, mowing them down with deadly laser fire. And here came what looked like a new kind of tank, its telltale red markings signifying it belonged to the Jedi, lurching through the same slimy ponds that Boba had survived.

Jedi gunships were closing in on the ruins that surrounded the crane tower and the pit. One gunship dodged a missile's streak; another was hit and spiraled down to crash unseen over the horizon.

*Yes!* Boba watched, fascinated. He hated both sides—the Jedi and the Count. But he loved the action.

It was chaos, and it was just the diversion he needed to help him escape. He looked down and saw his reflection in a puddle. His face was streaked with dirt again, but he was grinning from ear to ear.

Anything was better than being the Count's prisoner. He was free!

Boba heard a noise behind him and turned just in time to see a huge starship rise from the other end of the Count's hideout.

It was the Count, making his escape. Boba wondered if he had managed to rescue the dark treasure that he had come to Raxus Prime to find.

Two Jedi star fighters raced over the horizon, zeroing in on the Count's starship. The pursued and pursuers both vanished into the thick clouds.

KABOOM!

KABOOM!

Even though the Count had fled, his defense system was still working. It would keep firing until his slave droids were dead and the lasers ran out of energy. Boba kept his head down as he crawled through the rubble, looking for an opening that would lead back down into the hallways of the abandoned hideout where he had to go to get his father's book.

## **Terry Bisson**

Wearing his helmet for protection, Boba crawled through a smashed opening in a wall. The hallways were choked with smoke and rubble. The dust, the explosions, the noise, made everything difficult to see.

As he grasped his way through the abandoned corridor, Boba found that he felt very little fear. He had escaped the worst fate imaginable, and now he felt like a new man, or at least a new boy. What could happen to him worse than what he had escaped?

He saw a familiar-looking door. His room!

There was his bed, turned on its side by an explosion. But where was the flight bag that had been under it?

Frantically, Boba dug in the rubble with his hands until he felt the familiar curve of a handle. He pulled, harder and harder, until it came free.

Safe! He threw the helmet into the bag and sealed it. With the troopers around, it was best to keep Jango Fett's mask out of sight.



## CHAPTER NINE

Boba crawled toward the open air—and found himself face-to-face with a squadron of clone troopers bursting through the wreckage. As soon as they saw Boba, they leveled their blasters at him.

“Come with us,” the trooper said, extending a white-gloved hand.

Boba wondered if the trooper knew who he was. The trooper soon answered that question with his next words:

“Are you one of the orphans?”

“Uh, sure,” Boba replied. He *was* an orphan, after all.

“Name of missing or deceased parents.”

“Oh, uh—Teff,” said Boba.

“Orphan Teff, age, please?”

“Ten.”

“Under guidelines,” said the clone trooper. “Follow me for food and shelter.”

Food and shelter? That didn’t sound so bad.

Boba didn’t trust the Jedi, but this clone trooper was not a Jedi, even though he was probably working for them.

“Sure thing,” said Boba, picking up his flight bag and noticing the trooper’s number—CT-4/619.

## Terry Bisson

Explosions still rocked the building. Even though the Count had escaped, the battle raged on. The Count's slave droids were continuing the fight—and Boba was now caught in the crossfire.

The clone troopers paid little attention to the explosions as they lifted their blasters to repel the super battle droids. For a split second, Boba felt an echo of the past—the clone troopers' movements were almost exactly the same as Jango Fett's. The way they held their blaster rifles. The way their heads turned to take in the full scope of the battle. The fierce stealth of their steps. *He trained them as well as he trained me.*

*No, better.*

Boba knew he had to snap out of these thoughts. The battle droids were pushing for ward against the troopers' ranks, relentlessly firing their blasters. They had been programmed to kill or be destroyed. There would be no surrender, no retreat.

They aimed their fire at the troopers and at the top of the rubble's entrance. Boba dashed out into the open just as the door way began to cave in. The troopers inside died without a sound. The air was suddenly choked with dust. The other troopers did not look back.

An eruption of blaster fire landed at Boba's feet. *A close call.* A trooper at his side was knocked off his feet, crashing into the rubble. The droids, too, were being torn apart by the shooting. *A bloodbath—without the blood.*

There was nowhere for Boba to hide. No way to get out of this.

He picked up a fallen trooper's blaster and chose a side. The clones were his only chance of getting off the planet. He had to help them win.

Boba had never fought in a battle before. Whenever he'd held a blaster, his father had been at his side. Watching. Checking. Instructing.

Boba looked again at the troopers, the echo of his father. He raised his rifle like they raised theirs. He aimed at the controls of

one of the battle droids. Without hesitation, he fired. The droid exploded into parts.

Another trooper fell—there were only four left with Boba. He could hear the sound of other battles close by. *Who is winning?* CT-4/619 leaped—with Jango Fett's dexterity—toward a fallen excavation rig. Boba understood at once—*protection*. As the second and third troopers ran for cover, Boba kept in their shadow. The fourth trooper followed and was cut down by a rapid barrage of blaster fire. His mask went flying as he hit the ground. Boba knew if he looked he would see his father's face, replicated once more in death.

He did not look back.

Instead he positioned himself at CT-4/619's side, aiming his blaster rifle as the troopers made their last stand. One battle droid down. Then another. Still, it wasn't enough. There were at least a dozen left.

CT-4/619 did not falter. He did not look at Boba. He did not say a word. He kept his focus. He kept his aim. Boba knew this concentration well.

Boba fired again. A miss. The droid returned his fire, tearing a hole into the excavation rig—the only protection left.

Two more droids down. But the remaining droids were not deterred. They turned all their fire onto the third trooper the next time he moved into blasting position. He didn't have a chance.

*This is it*, Boba thought. *There's no other way out.*

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see another form approaching. Not a clone. Not a droid. A female Bothan, bearded and small. Wearing the robes of a Jedi.

With one sharp, quick movement, the Jedi activated her lightsaber and began to repel the droids' fire. As the droids turned their attack on her, Boba and the two remaining clone troopers had an open shot.

The droids began to fall. The Jedi expertly destroyed them with their own fire. The remaining clones rallied with cold precision. And Boba did his part. He was not as experienced or

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as focused as his clone brothers. But he had a desire to survive that they couldn't match.

The firing from the droids slowed...then stopped. There were none left. Boba looked over to see the Jedi's reaction—but she was already gone. Off to the next skirmish in order to complete this invasion.

Eventually, the laser cannons fell silent. Some of the gunships left the perimeter, their mission complete. A few more circled, the remains of the attack force. Jedi and clone troopers combed the ground for survivors—and prisoners. CT-4/619 led Boba forward. There was no time to stop and mourn for the dead. There were no congratulations, no expressions of relief. Just the task at hand—getting back to the ship, finishing the mission.

They walked across the smoking rubble toward a sleek gunship idling in the swirling, stinking mists. Boba followed resolutely. Even though he was walking into the hands of the Jedi, it was worth it to be walking out of the grasp of Raxus Prime. CT-4/619 took away Boba's blaster rifle as he walked on board the gunship—but luckily he was allowed to keep his bag. Boba followed the trooper into the pilot area. The trooper got into the pilot's seat and Boba sat in another seat.

"Not for seating," said the trooper. "For my partner, CT-5/501. Detainees sit on the floor. We'll wait here for the others."

Boba wasn't about to protest. He sat on his flight bag while the trooper powered up the vehicle.

*Where's the food?* Boba wondered. He suddenly realized how cold and hungry and tired he was.

The gunship seemed awfully comfortable, even on the durasteel floor. He could still hear the last gasp of explosions and commands being given over the gunship's comm unit, but for some strange reason, he felt safe. He knew he had survived.

"Impossible!"

Boba opened his eyes. Had he dozed off?

There was a face on the viewscreen. Angry, violet eyes peered out from under long ash-blond hair and over a cream-colored beard that had been braided into points. But it wasn't the face that bothered Boba, or even the harsh, demanding voice.

It was the uniform.

Even though this Jedi had just saved Boba's life, she was still the enemy. Boba knew he had to remember that.

"Impossible!" the Jedi said again. "There are no humanoid orphans on Raxus Prime, only Jawas. The planet is nothing but a toxic dump."

"Nevertheless, General Glynn-Beti," said CT-4/619. "I rescued one and brought him into the gunship, as per instructions."

"Bring him up and stick him with the others, then. We will check on him just like the rest."

Boba tried not to show the emotion in his face. The troopers were easy enough to fool; or perhaps they didn't care. But the Jedi would see through his deception. They were looking for him; he had almost been apprehended on Coruscant. He was starting to think it was better to stay on Raxus Prime, foul as it was.

But wait! Boba's new wisdom took over. The Jedi thought he was a war orphan. He would be put with other orphans, as she had said. If he kept his mouth shut, he would get food, shelter—and transportation to another planet, where he could begin the search for Aurra Sing and *Slave I*.

Self-sufficiency was all about using the opportunities that presented themselves. The Jedi wanted orphans—so Boba Fett would be Orphan Teff!

## CHAPTER TEN

Boba stared out the narrow viewscreen as the powerful gunship rose above the slag heaps of Raxus Prime and into the clouds. He was glad to see the last of the galaxy's most toxic planet!

A droid fighter closed in on them, but the craft's automated turret targeted it and annihilated it with withering turbo fire. Below, skirmishes continued as clone troopers cleaned out the slave droids and continued their work in the Count's compound.

As he watched the clone troopers work together to fly the ship, Boba felt pangs of jealousy. He yearned to get his hands on the controls of a ship. He missed flying; it was all he had ever cared about or wanted to do.

"Entering high orbit," said CT-5/501. "Request permission to approach *Candaserri*."

"Permission granted."

The clones worked well together, executing the small tasks of maneuvering and communications with hardly a word among them. They flew the ship skillfully, avoiding fire and making precise judgments, but without any particular joy or style.

Boba found them fascinating, but slightly repellent. It was just too weird. They were his brothers, though they didn't know it. Like him, they were clones of Jango Fett, but they had matured

at twice the normal rate. They looked and acted twenty years old, not ten.

Their rushed maturity and other engineering meant that they were very narrow in their interests and enthusiasms. They seemed to have no fear, and no excitement, either. They weren't the least bit interested in Boba, which suited Boba fine.

*The less I see of these guys, the better.*

Boba retreated to a back corner of the cockpit and he opened the black book his father had left him. He needed some advice. He needed to feel that he wasn't entirely alone.

But there was no new message. Only the message that had brought him here:

*Self-sufficiency you will learn from the Count.*

The Count who had wanted to kill him? Who had stolen his father's credits and cheated and betrayed him?

*Yes.* Boba suddenly understood what his father's cryptic message meant.

The Count had taught Boba never to trust anyone again. The Count had taught him that he could rely only on himself.

The Count had taught him *self-sufficiency*.

And with that came confidence.

Boba returned to the viewscreen. Stars! He greeted them like old friends, with a fierce joy. He hadn't realized how much he had missed them on Raxus Prime, which was so polluted that the stars were never visible.

Space, cold and empty as it was, felt like home.

The gunship soared in silence through the void until an assault ship came into view—first as a single far-off dot of light, one among millions; then as a galaxy, spinning slowly; then as a

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dagger shape, larger and larger, festooned with dozens of turbo lasers. “Awesome,” said Boba. “What’s its name again?”

It was the biggest ship he had ever seen—as big as a city, floating in space.

“Starship *Candaserri*,” CT-4/619 reported. “Republic troopship, *Acclamator*-class. Seven hundred fifty-two meters long. Crew seven hundred, military and support personnel fifteen thousand five hundred.”

“And Jedi?” Boba asked.

“Only a few. They are in command, usually on the command bridge.”

“Any names?” Boba wondered if they would include the hated Obi-Wan Kenobi, or Mace Windu, who had killed his father.

“Glynn-Beti is the Jedi general who works with us,” said CT-4/619. “You will meet her or her Padawan, who is in charge of the orphans as well.”

“Padawan?”

“A Padawan Learner is an apprentice Jedi.”

*Oh*, thought Boba, remembering the young Jedi, Anakin Skywalker, who had also been present at Jango Fett’s death.

Boba felt a mixture of excitement and apprehension as they drew closer to the *Candaserri*’s rear docking bay.

Tiny figures could be seen behind the ports and windows: crew members going about their duties, clone troops drilling.

And somewhere, on the bridge perhaps, the hated Jedi.

Soon, Boba knew, he would face a stern test. If he could conceal his true identity, the Jedi could help him by taking him far away from Raxus Prime. He could then begin the task of tracking down Aurra Sing and recovering the stolen *Slave I*.

After a few more maneuvers, they were ready to land. Airlocks hissed, ramps dropped, doors slid open.

Boba followed the two clone troopers out into a huge enclosed space. The rear docking bay was filled with gunships and starfighters, lined up in neat rows. Clone troopers in fours



and sixes walked among them, guarding them or servicing them—it was hard for Boba to tell.

Boba heard footsteps approaching. “Where is the orphan?” a serious voice called out. “Let’s see!”

“Over here,” said CT-4/619.

Boba saw two robed Jedi approaching. Both were small, no taller than he was.

*This was it.* Boba turned to CT-4/619 and CT-5/501. They had saved him from Raxus Prime. He wanted to say good-bye, and thanks.

But they were already gone. Was that them, in the clone group servicing a *Cord*-class star fighter? Or were they among the four walking out the door in formation?

There was no way to tell; the troopers all looked exactly alike.

“Orphan Teff?”

Boba nodded, looking down.

The Jedi who stood in front of him was only about a meter and a half tall, but radiated power and command. Boba would have felt it even if he hadn’t seen her in action on the battlefield. She had violet eyes and a pointed beard. Boba was not surprised by the beard. He knew her as a Bothan, and all Bothans, male and female alike, were bearded.

The younger Jedi, the Padawan, had three eyes and horns, but a friendly look.

“We didn’t expect to find orphans on Raxus Prime,” said the elder Jedi. “I am Glynn-Beti. This is my Padawan, Ulu Ulix.”

The younger Jedi bowed. Boba bowed back.

“You sure you’re an orphan and not a Separatist spy?” asked Glynn-Beti gruffly. She didn’t seem to expect an answer. “Teff, huh? Account for yourself, Teff! How did you get on Raxus Prime?”

Boba put his hands behind his back, so she wouldn’t see them trembling. This was harder than he had thought!

“Speak up, Orphan Teff! What are your parents’ names? What’s in the bag there? Open it, please.”

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Boba panicked. If he opened the flight bag and the Jedi saw the Mandalorian battle helmet, they would know he was Jango Fett's son. They would arrest him immediately. He didn't know what to do. *Self-sufficiency, don't fail me now!*

Instead of opening the bag, Boba decided to burst into tears. He covered his face with his hands and began to sob.

"Oh, bother!" said Glynn-Beti, visibly uncomfortable. "Ulu, take him to the Orphan Hall. But stop by the bacta baths first—he stinks of Raxus Prime, and who knows what contagion breeds there."

She turned on a tiny, pointed heel, and was gone.

"Come with me, Teff," said the Padawan, putting a gentle arm around Boba's shoulder. "Don't cry. Let's get you some clean clothes and something to eat. You'll feel better then, I promise. You don't seem like a spy and we'll hear your story later."

Boba sniffled as he followed Ulu Ulix. He kept his face covered to hide his true feelings.

*It worked!* he thought.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Boba figured that taking a bacta bath was one of the galaxy's most intense experiences. He breathed through a mask while he was submerged in a synthetic gel that did a search and repair over every centimeter of his body, *inside and out*, healing, restoring, and refreshing every organ.

It took hours.

It made him tingle all over.

And it got rid of the stink of Raxus Prime.

*Much better*, Boba thought as he allowed the air scrubber to dry him. He put on the clean coveralls that had been set out for him by Ulu Ulix.

He was glad to see that no one had opened his flight bag.

"You look like a new person," said Ulu when he returned. "As you can see, Teff, there's no need to cry. Lots of kids have been separated from their parents during this war. Most of them will be reunited, I am sure. Meanwhile, all you orphans—*temporary* orphans—are being taken to a temporary clearing site in the beautiful Cloud City of Beshpin."

*Beshpin!* Boba perked up. The gas giant was fairly remote but a minor hub of the galaxy, and a good place to start his search for Aurra Sing. *Things are looking better already.*

## Terry Bisson

Boba and Ulu walked through the halls of the vast ship. It was like Coruscant, levels and levels interlocked with ladders and chutes. But the halls were not teeming with hangers-on and tourists from all over the galaxy, all in different brightly colored outfits. Rather, there were only two basic types:

—the crew, who represented every sentient race or life-form. Diverse in color, stature, and shape, they were united by their magenta tunics.

—and the clone troopers, all looking alike, whether they were in their white battle armor or their red coveralls. With their helmets off, their blank faces showed neither emotion nor interest in anything outside their own ranks.

*I hope I don't look that blank when I'm twenty*, Boba thought with a shudder.

Ulu Ulix was very friendly, for a Jedi. He seemed to lack that aggressive arrogance that Boba associated with the order.

*He'll probably flunk out*, Boba thought.

They went into what must have been one of many small kitchens set up to feed the around-the-clock patrols. “The other kids will be at dinner,” said Ulu Ulix. “You must be starving. What would you like?”

All the food was unfamiliar. Boba pointed to what looked like a meat pie that was sitting behind a pane of glass.

Ulu pressed his palm against the glass, and the meat pie made itself in a swirl of laser light, then floated out, released temporarily from the ship's artificial gravity.

“Thanks!” Boba said, catching it. It tasted better than good—it had been a long time since he'd had a full meal.

Boba didn't like Jedi—at all!—but it was hard to hate Ulu. He was different. Almost cordial. “Aren't you going to eat some?” Boba asked. “You can have a bite of mine.”

“Not hungry. I just ate the day before yesterday.”

At the end of a long hallway in the depths of the ship, they found a dormitory. It was empty of people, but filled with beds, all of them short.

“Grab an empty bed, Teff,” said Ulu. “The other kids will be back from dinner soon. They’ll tell you the drill. It mainly involves staying out of the way.”

“That’s it?”

“That’s it,” said Ulu. “I’m in charge of the Orphan Hall. It’s part of my training. I try to make things as easy for you kids as possible. If there’s anything you need, just let me know.”

Ulu smiled and left, and Boba lay down on a bunk by the wall. This was going to be something new: a roomful of kids. Was he finally going to have a chance to make some friends? That would be something new for sure! His father had warned him about friendships and making himself weak to so-called friends. But Boba was still curious.

For now, Boba was too tired to think about it. He lay down and closed his eyes. It seemed that his head had barely hit the pillow when he was awakened by a hideous cackling noise, as if he were being attacked by a flock of birds.

He sat up, terrified. A nightmare?

He opened his eyes. No nightmare. It was kids—shouting, screaming, laughing, jumping on and off the beds. Boba looked at them and groaned. They were incredibly loud, and diverse. The only older kids (his age) he saw were separated into two groups, a small group of girls, looking suspiciously at a small group of boys.

The rest of the kids were squalling, laughing, and crying. The chaos was unbelievable. Boba groaned again. This was far worse than he had imagined. Boba Fett, the bounty hunter’s son, who could fly a starship and survive a Count’s attack...stuck with a bunch of underage brats!

*I don’t belong here!* Boba put his pillow over his head, hoping he would go to sleep before he went crazy.

And he got lucky.

He did.

## Terry Bisson

In dreams there is no past and future, only a shining endless now. In dreams there is no gravity, no hunger, no cold...

"Hey."

Boba groaned. In his dream he was riding a great beast around and around in an arena, trying to catch up with his father, but he kept slipping off...

"Hey!"

"I am," said Boba.

"You am what?" a voice said with a laugh.

"Holding on," said Boba. But there was nothing to hold on to. The beast was gone.

Boba sat up and opened his eyes.

He was in the dorm, the Orphan Hall. The noise was now a low hum, still obnoxious but bearable.

Most of the kids were playing games or sitting and rocking their toys or dolls. All but one, who was sitting at the foot of his bed.

"Wake up," he said—or was he a she? It was hard to tell. The kid at the end of the bed was a humanoid, like Boba, but with darker skin and shorter hair—and very merry eyes.

Boba smiled. He couldn't help it. "Who are you?"

"The only reasonably mature kid in this zoo. And I'm exactly what you need."

"Which is what?"

"A friend."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“I’m Garr,” said the visitor sitting at the foot of the bed, extending a hand.

Boba took it cautiously. “Teff,” he said, remembering the name he had conjured up for the Jedi. (He wished he had been more creative.) He sat up and rubbed his head. “I must have fallen asleep. How long was I sleeping?”

“Days,” said Garr. “A standard day, anyway, according to the ship’s chronos. We all notice when there’s someone new. You had been in the bacta bath but you still smelled a little ripe. Where did they pick you up, anyway?”

“Raxus Prime,” said Boba.

“Ugh. Is it as bad as they say?”

“Worse,” Boba confided. He decided to change the subject. “Where were you, uh, picked up?”

“Excarga,” said Garr. “My parents are ore traders. When the Separatists arrived to take control of our ore-processing facilities, they took everyone prisoner, so my parents hid me. Later, when the Republic counterattacked, they picked me up, but I couldn’t find my parents. What about your parents?”

“My parents?”

Garr pointed around the Orphan Hall. “All of us are here because we were separated from our parents. Sometimes I think

## Terry Bisson

that's why they call them Separatists. What about your parents? Were they captured or, you know..."

Garr was reluctant to say the word. Boba wasn't. "Killed," he said. "My father was killed. Cut down. I saw it. I watched it."

Boba looked down and saw that his fists were clenched. He wondered if he should tell his new friend that it wasn't the Separatists who had killed his father—but the Jedi.

"I'm sorry," said Garr. "What happened to your mother? If you don't mind my asking."

"I don't mind your asking," said Boba, "if you don't mind my not answering."

"Fair enough." Garr got up and pulled at Boba's hand. "Let's go get something to eat. The commissary closes in a few minutes, and most of the space brats are finished, so we'll have a little peace and quiet."

For the next few days, and for the first time in his life, Boba had a friend. He could hardly believe it. He decided not to question it, but simply accept it as one of the surprises life was throwing at him. By nature—and by teaching—he was suspicious of anyone who came too close. But now he was...enjoying it.

Garr was good at having fun. When they weren't exploring the ship, the two played sabacc or simply lay on their bunks and talked, trying to ignore the chaos and craziness of the other orphans.

There were a few other kids their age, but Garr avoided them, and Boba did, too. They might ask too many questions. Because most of the orphans were much younger, Ulu was too busy with the "space brats" (as Garr called them) to worry about what his older orphans were up to.

All orphans were prohibited from roaming the ship unattended, but that's exactly what Garr and Boba did, telling Ulu that they were going to one of the ship's libraries for a book



(not likely, since all they had were boring military manuals) when in fact they were exploring the ship's seemingly endless corridors.

Boba shared his discovery with Garr—that no one notices a ten-year-old. And it was true. The troopers or crew members they ran into in the corridors simply assumed that the two friends were someone else's responsibility, if they noticed them at all.

Politics didn't interest Garr, but starships did. "This is the most advanced assault ship in the Republic's fleet," Boba's new friend explained. "There are over fifteen thousand troopers, all with the most advanced weaponry. They are all alike—I think they're clones."

"Imagine that," said Boba. He wondered what Garr would think if he knew the clones' true origin.

Garr's favorite place was the rear docking bay, where the starfighters were lined up to be armed and serviced by busy tech droids.

"I could fly one of those," Boba said once. He regretted saying it immediately; it gave too much away.

"Really?" Garr asked. "Who taught you? Your father?"

Boba nodded.

"My mother would have had a fit," said Garr. "What did your mother think about you flying a starfighter so young?"

"I don't honestly know," said Boba. "I never asked her."

Boba knew his words sounded hollow. They felt hollow, too.

Boba's favorite spot on the ship was its rear observation blister, or ROB. A small, cold room under a clear plexi dome, it was usually empty, since the crew was too busy to look at the stars and the troopers didn't care about anything except war and discipline.

The ship was traveling through normal space, which meant that the stars didn't streak by (or appear to streak by) as they did in hyperspace. Even though the ship was traveling at thousands

## Terry Bisson

of kilometers per second, it seemed as though it were standing still, space was so huge.

Standing or sitting on a bench under the dome, Boba saw a sea of stars in every direction. There were no planets visible, only gas giants, dwarfs, quasars, and the occasional smudge that marked the location of a black hole. Distant galaxies were pinwheels of fire.

“Okay, we’ve seen space, and it’s boring!” Garr was always more interested in adventure than astronomy. “Let’s find something to do.”

“Just a few minutes...” Boba liked the view, but he liked the dreams he had while staring into space even more. He was always dreaming of the day he would get *Slave I* back, and experience the stars on his own.

As they explored the ship’s corridors, Boba and Garr often had to stand aside for formations of clone troopers marching to the mess hall or to the main docking bay for a battle sortie.

“I think they are creepy,” said Garr.

“Me too,” said Boba.

“If you see them without their helmets, they all look alike,” said Garr.

The troopers marched from place to place, or sat in their dorms polishing their Tibanna-gas blasters. They never talked with anyone outside their ranks, and rarely talked to one another; and never noticed the two ten-year-olds who walked among them. They always traveled in groups of four, six, ten—always even numbers. They didn’t like to be alone.

They paid no attention to Boba and Garr as they continued to go everywhere together. They saw the vast hydroponic farms, tended by droids, that turned waste into air and water, just like the forests and kelp beds on the planets. They saw the immense plasma engines, tended by droids and a few harried crew

members. They saw the clone troopers, never excited, never bored, endlessly cleaning their weapons.

After a few days of exploring, they had covered almost every part of the vast assault ship, except for one area.

The bridge.

"I would give anything to see the bridge!" said Garr. "I even tried it once, but I couldn't sneak in. No kids allowed! The bridge is where the Jedi hang out, you know."

"Who cares?" said Boba. The less he saw of the Jedi, the better. Luckily, they seemed to have lost interest in him after their surprise at finding him on Raxus Prime.

"I care!" said Garr. "I admire the Jedi. They are the guardians of civilization, willing to sacrifice all so that others can live in peace. I wish I'd be found to be Force-sensitive and trained as Jedi. Don't you?"

"Not me," Boba said. He thought about telling Garr the truth—that he hated the Jedi, and wanted to be a bounty hunter, like his father.

But he decided against it. There was a limit to how much you could trust anyone, even your best friend.

Garr had a secret too, at least as far as Boba was concerned. Or at least, a mystery.

The mystery was whether Garr was a boy or a girl. Boba had gone so long without figuring it out that now he was almost embarrassed to ask. But he knew enough not to let embarrassment hold him back. (That was part of wisdom, too.)

"Garr," he said one day as they were strolling down a long corridor, "do you mind if I ask you a question?"

"Not at all," Garr said. "As long as you don't mind if I don't answer."

"Fair enough," said Boba, recognizing what he'd said when Garr had asked about his mother. "Are you a boy or a girl?"

"Like, male or female?"

## Terry Bisson

“Yeah, you know.”

“I don’t know, actually,” said Garr. “I mean, I know what you mean, but I don’t know yet whether I am male or female. On my planet, it’s not determined until age thirteen.”

“Determined?”

“Somewhere around our thirteenth birthday, our bodies change, and become one or the other. Until then, it’s sort of, you know, up in the air.”

“Cool,” said Boba. “I was just wondering.”

“Does it make a difference?” Garr asked.

“Not to me.”

“Good. I wish everybody was like you, Teff. Did you ever wonder why I don’t hang out with the other ten-year-olds? They want to treat you one way if you’re a boy, and another way if you’re a girl, and there’s no in-between. No way to be just a kid, just a person.”

“Stupid,” said Boba. But he wasn’t surprised. He had always thought most people, including most kids, were a little slow. “Can’t they treat somebody as just a friend?”

“Nope,” said Garr. “But come on! Let’s find something to do!”

They were off again.

The troopship cruised slowly (under light speed) through normal space, on the lookout for Separatist forces. There were no more battles, though they heard rumors of other battles taking place throughout the Republic.

“The ship will be warping into hyperspace soon,” said Garr one day. “It will take us to one of the central worlds, probably Bospin, where we will be offloaded at some orphanage. I hope we will still be together.”

“Me too,” said Boba. He didn’t want to tell his friend that it wasn’t going to happen. Boba had no intention of going to an orphanage.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Hey, Garr, check this out!”

They were in the rear docking bay, alone except for a few service droids humming and buzzing busily on the far side of the vast room.

“What?” Garr said. “It’s just a door.”

The door was marked EMERGENCY ONLY.

“I’ll bet I can open it,” said Boba. The system looked very similar to the one his father had used to teach him to hot-wire locks.

“So?”

“So this is our chance. You are always talking about wanting to see the bridge, the command center of the ship, right?”

“Yeah, sure,” said Garr. “But this door doesn’t lead to the bridge. This is an emergency airlock door. It leads to the outside of the ship. To outer space.”

“Exactly,” said Boba. “Come on. Follow me.”

With a deft crossing of wires and simulation of code, Boba opened the door. On the other side was a small airlock, lined with space suits on hangers. It was like a closet with two doors. Boba knew that once the inner door was closed, and the outer door was opened, the air would rush out and the door would open into space.

## **Terry Bisson**

The anti-grav plates were off inside the airlock. Boba and Garr both floated free, past the space suits.

"Yikes," said Garr. "I'm not used to this. What if I get sick and throw up?"

"Just don't think about it," said Boba. "Pick a space suit and let's go."

All the suits were slightly too large for ten-year-old bodies. The suits were for emergency evacuation only, so they carried only small air tanks and battery-powered heaters, enough for an hour and a half.

"One hour will be long enough," said Boba.

"Are you sure?" asked Garr, picking a suit. "What if something goes wrong?"

"What could go wrong?" Boba asked as he helped zip Garr into the suit. He put on his own suit, and selected two helmets from the rack nearby.

He spit on his helmet's faceplate and wiped it with his sleeve before putting it on. "Keeps it from fogging," he said.

"Whatever you say," Garr said, spitting on the faceplate and wiping it dry.

When both suits were on, secure and sealed, Boba tried the comlinks. He showed Garr the switch built into the wrist gauntlet.

"Can you hear me?"

"You're shouting!" said Garr. "Turn the volume down."

"Sorry..."

Boba made sure the inner door was closed and sealed. Then he pushed off the wall and floated across the tiny room to the outer door, which was thicker. Instead of a knob it had a wheel.

He looked at Garr, questioning. Garr gave him a thumbs-up.

Boba turned the wheel to the left.

One turn, two.

He was just beginning to think nothing was going to happen when, all of a sudden, there was a WHOOOOOOSH of air. Boba shivered as the icy chill of space rushed into the room.

Boba started to push the door open, then stopped. "Almost forgot!" He grabbed a ten-meter coil of safety line from the wall. He clipped one to Garr's belt and the other end to his own.

Then he opened the door and floated out into the emptiness of space.

Garr watched for a moment, swallowed hard—

And followed.

They were floating in an endless sea of stars.

It was like falling, down down down, into a hole as deep as all eternity. A hole so deep, they would never hit bottom.

The stars went on forever, and Boba and Garr floated among them like specks of dust.

*No*, thought Boba, it was the stars that were dust.

*And Garr and I are dust's dust—*

"Better now," said Garr, swallowing bravely. "Now what?"

"Now we find the bridge," said Boba. "We have over an hour. But we have to be careful."

"I'm feeling *very, very* careful!" said Garr.

"Good. We have to keep secured to the ship. If we float away from it..."

"What will happen?" Garr asked.

"Nothing will happen."

"Nothing?"

"Nothing forever. We will float forever, spinning off into space until we die. There's no way back, since these emergency suits don't have jetpacks. But don't worry, we have our safety line."

"Do I sound worried?" Garr asked.

Boba laughed. "Yes!"

"Good!" said Garr. "If I weren't worried, I would be crazy!"

Boba made sure Garr had a good hold on the hull of the ship. Then he floated forward ten meters until the line stopped him, and he found a handhold on the ship.

## Terry Bisson

Then he secured the line while Garr went ahead.

They took turns that way, climbed “up” the ship toward the bridge, belaying for safety while the other forged ahead, finding the route:

—Over and around the huge ion engines, each trailing a kilometers-long exhaust of ghostly blue photons, like smoke.

—Up the sheer long cliff of the *Candaserrri*’s dorsal fin, being careful never to look back and “down” into the well of stars.

—Across the traverse of the sheer hull side, staying on the steel strips between the rows of lighted windows.

“Secure!”

“Going ahead!”

The suit comlinks made the two friends’ voices seem closer than when they were in atmosphere. They pulled themselves along, using every bolt, antenna, edge, and knob of the hull. Sometimes, through the windows, they saw crew members hurrying along a corridor, or clone troopers marching in formation toward the mess hall or the dorm.

“Careful,” said Boba, tucking himself into a niche whenever they passed a window. “If anyone sees us, we’re in big trouble.”

“They’ll raise the alarm,” said Garr. “They’ll think it’s an attack!”

Boba and Garr were too close to the ship to see the shape or the size of it. Each ridge, fin, or bulge in the hull was a surprise, and hid another.

Finally, they saw the sleek pod that was the bridge tower module, perched atop a dorsal fin. It looked almost like a smaller ship hitching a ride on the *Candaserrri*. It was windowless except for the wide plexi bubble-window at the front.

“They will have alarms,” said Boba. “We’ll have to move carefully.”

The two made their way up the fin, then to the top of the pod. Standing roped together, and secured by their mag-soles, they cautiously worked their way forward until they had reached the top edge of the wide forward window.



Boba knelt, Garr beside him. They crept over the edge of the window and looked down. Boba felt totally exposed. If any of the crew looked up, they would see two helmeted heads looking in *from space!*

Every alarm in the ship would go off.

But no one was looking up. The bridge was quiet. Crew members sat at their control consoles, while officers circulated among them, checking the system coordinates.

“Awesome!” said Garr. “This is the main command center. Everything happens here first.”

The captain and the first officers, in their brightly colored uniforms, were consulting with a robed Jedi at a holomap table. Boba recognized Glynn-Beti, the Bothan Jedi who had questioned him.

*I’m lucky she got distracted, he thought. If she had made me open that flight bag, I would probably be a prisoner right now.*

“I wonder what they are talking about,” Garr said. “Maybe they got word about some of the parents. I would like to see my parents again.”

Boba didn’t say anything. It was an awkward moment.

“Someday you will meet my parents,” said Garr. “You will like them.”

“Maybe,” Boba said. *I doubt it, he thought.*

Boba was ready to go, but he was waiting for Garr—who liked watching people as much as Boba liked watching stars.

Garr lay facedown, looking through the window at the crew on the bridge.

Boba lay on his back, staring up. He loved the dizzy feeling he got, looking deep into a sea of stars and galaxies.

They had been on top of the bridge tower module for almost twenty minutes. Boba checked his air tank and it was still over half full. But his heater was running down. He could feel the chill of space seeping into his suit, especially at his feet and hands.

## **Terry Bisson**

“We should be heading back,” he said to Garr.

“Couple of more minutes,” said Garr. “They’re looking at another holomap.”

“A map? Let’s see.” Boba rolled over and looked down.

“That’s a weird map!” said Garr. “I can’t tell anything about it.”

“Uh-oh,” said Boba.

“What?”

“We’d better get back into the airlock, fast!”

“What’s wrong?” Garr’s voice was sharp with fear.

Just then a siren wailed. The two could feel it reverberating through the hull.

“That’s the ten-minute alarm!” Boba said. “That was a hyperspace map they were looking at. The ship is about to jump!”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Faster!

Down, down—

Faster!

Around, around—

Boba was no longer feeling the cold, even though the little heater in his suit was almost drained.

Garr was gulping air, spinning through the vacuum, grabbing at one handhold and then another.

Neither spoke. There was no time for words. They hurried toward the back of the ship where the big ion jets were staining the universe a pale blue.

*How much time do we have left? Boba wondered. Six minutes? Five?*

“What happens if...?” Garr asked as they made their way down the fin from the bridge tower module.

“If what?”

“You know what! If we don’t get inside the ship before the jump into hyperspace!?”

“At best, we will see a flash of light, and be fried to a crisp in the plasma flare of the hyperspace warp.”

“That’s best? What’s worst?”

## Terry Bisson

“At worst we won’t feel a thing or even see a flash of light. We will just look around and see no ship. It will be gone. And we will drift here all alone, endlessly, until we die.”

The alert siren still wailed but they heard it only when they touched the hull, through their hands or the soles of their boots.

At the steepest part of the wing, Garr missed a step, and spun off into space. Boba grabbed a seam and held on for dear life. The safety line snapped tight—yanking Garr back into Boba.

OOOMMPPHHHFF!

“Careful,” Boba said. He wanted to say “slow down” but he knew he couldn’t. If they slowed down, they were lost.

“You idiot!” said Boba as he untangled the line and started down, over the rear of the wing.

“I’m sorry!” Garr said. “I missed a hold.”

“I was talking to myself!” Boba said. “This whole thing is my fault. It was a stupid idea!”

*I lost track of what was most important. A bounty hunter never does that.*

Through the window Boba could see crew members running, security droids clearing the halls, and clone troopers scurrying in formation.

How much time left? *Three minutes? Two?*

The airlock was still at least five minutes away...

“This way!” Boba said. It looked like a shortcut.

He plunged down into a dark “canyon”—a slot between the rear boosters and the ventral hull fin—making his way hand over hand.

It was dark, and the handholds were far apart. Garr belayed Boba, and then Boba belayed Garr, so that one of them was always secured to the hull of the ship.

Boba grinned when he emerged at the other end of the slot. His gamble had paid off. There was the lighted airlock door, still open, waiting for them—only a hundred meters away!

Two hundred meters if they went around on the hull. One hundred if they took a chance and floated straight across.

“Let’s try it,” Boba said. “This last jump can be made in one leap if we both let go.”

“But what if we miss?”

“Then we’re dead. But we may be dead anyway if we don’t try it. We’re running out of time.”

Boba looked at his friend. He wondered if he looked as frightened to Garr as Garr did to him. *Probably!*

“Well, then,” said Garr, giving a brave thumbs-up, “what are we waiting for? Let’s try it!”

The airlock door a hundred meters away looked tiny.

Boba gathered the rope into a coil, took Garr’s hand, and said, “On three. One...two...”

He didn’t remember saying “three” but he realized he must have said it, for they were floating free in space, unbelayed—

—drifting slowly, hand in hand, toward the lighted square of the airlock door.

Both were silent. Boba was hardly even breathing. It was as if a word, a breath, might make them miss their target, and spin them off into space.

*Thirty meters, twenty, ten—*

As they got closer, Boba saw that the target was even bigger than he had thought. The airlock door had handholds on either side, so he didn’t have to hit it dead center.

And at the end of the hull, just past the door, there was an antenna.

At the last minute a slight spin turned Boba and he saw that he was, in fact, going to miss the airlock door.

*No sweat.* “Your move, Garr. Just grab at those handholds as we go by.”

“Got it!” said Garr. “Well, almost...” Another spin had pulled Garr back, just short of the handholds. Now they were floating on toward the end of the hull.

## **Terry Bisson**

Luckily the antenna was right in reach. Boba let go of Garr's hand and uncoiled the rope. He reached out and grabbed the antenna as he floated past.

"Got it!" he said aloud, to himself and Garr.

Just as it broke off in his hand.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“Ooooph!”

The safety line went tight, jerking Boba and Garr together, then setting them spinning, like a kid’s toy—a giant kid’s toy that had been thrown away, down the deepest darkest hole in all the universe.

The deep dark hole that *is* the universe.

For they were spinning away from the ship, attached to each other but to nothing else, doomed to float on forever while the *Candaserri* disappeared into hyperspace.

They both were moving, falling, tumbling, head over heels away from the ship, toward the emptiness of space.

Deep into the Big Isn’t.

Realizing the worst made Boba feel calmer. His panic was gone. His fear was gone. He remembered something his father had said: *The worse things are, the calmer you need to be.*

He felt as if he were standing still and watching the universe spin around him. There was the *Candaserri*; then there was Garr, at the other end of the safety line; then just stars until the ship came up again.

Each time the ship was slightly smaller. *How long before it’s gone altogether?* Boba wondered. The hyperspace jump was due at any moment.

## Terry Bisson

“Teff, you still there?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s been great, being your friend.”

“Same here,” said Boba. He almost wished he had told his friend his real name. Maybe it wasn’t too late...

He caught sight of Garr, wheeling through his field of view.

Then the stars again, white except for one tiny orange one.

Then the ship, still there.

*Orange star? Where had that come from?*

Boba watched as the orange star came up again. It was exactly opposite the ship in his spin. If he had a jetpack, he could use the orange star for a fix: Aiming at it would stop his spin and guide him toward the ship.

No jetpack, though. And only a few minutes of air. When it was gone—

And that was when he got the idea.

“Teff? You still there?”

“Yeah.”

“What’re you doing? I hear a clicking noise.”

“I’ve got an idea,” Boba said.

“What?”

“Can’t talk. Gotta save air. Just hang on to the line—and hope for the best.”

Boba’s emergency space suit had no jetpack, but it did have something that might possibly be used for a jetpack.

The air tank.

Boba disconnected his air tank and pulled it from his back. Now all he had to breathe was the air in his suit. It would last less than a minute.

Boba held the air tank against his stomach and waited for the orange star to appear in his wheeling, whirling field of vision.

*There it was!* He pressed the release valve.

SSSSSSSSSS

The universe slowed down, just a little. Boba waited until the orange star appeared again.



SSSSSSSSSSSS

Slowed more. And this time the ship was closer when Boba saw it swim into view.

SSSSSSSSSSSSSS

*We're moving!* Garr was still spinning at the other end of the lifeline. But Boba was stable. He could see the ship over his shoulder, getting closer, as he aimed the air tank at the little orange star and used the air like a rocket engine.

SSSSSSSSSS

For every action—like the air hissing out—there is an equal and opposite reaction—like Boba floating backward toward the ship. He felt the line jerk tight, and knew he was pulling Garr with him.

“What’s going on?” Garr asked.

Boba didn’t answer. All he had to breathe was the leftover air in his suit, and it was getting stale.

SSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS

The ship was getting closer. Closer. There at the bottom was the open airlock door.

Boba aimed at the little orange star again.

SSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS

Closer and closer.

SSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS

The air in Boba’s suit was almost gone. He gasped for breath. SSSSSSSSSSSSS. He sprayed the air into space, but he needed it in his suit, in his lungs...

SSSSS SSSSSS

The air was almost gone from the tank. Boba could see the ship over his shoulder, getting closer and closer. But not quite close enough.

S S SSS S S

Boba felt his head spinning. His lungs were burning, begging him for air.

Little orange star.

Garr at end of line.

## Terry Bisson

Ship huge, close—

“Teff, are you there? Something is pulling us toward the ship!  
They must have seen us!”

SS SS SSsssss—

Last gasp of air. *Did we make it?*

“Garr, grab handrail!”

Did Garr hear? Boba hit the side of the door and bounced back, into space. He reached for the handhold by the airlock door, but it was out of reach. *Just* out of reach!

He was falling again, forever this time—

And that was when his father came to him, out of the tomb of death, out of the darkness of dream, grabbing his hand, and pulling.

Pulling and pulling...

*Boba!*

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Good job, Teffl”

Boba smiled. His father had covered him with a blanket made of stars, and praised him. But didn't he know his name wasn't *Teffl*? That was a stupid made-up name for...

“Breathe, Teffl”

Who pulled the blanket away?

“Wake up.”

Boba opened his eyes. He saw Garr's worried face.

They were in the airlock. Boba's helmet was off. He opened his mouth, took a deep breath, and it was like shaking hands with an old friend.

Air! Wonderful air.

“What happened?” he asked.

“You passed out,” said Garr. “After you saved us. Using the air tank like a little rocket. That was brilliant.”

“Every action has an equal and opposite reaction,” said Boba. “I think that was one of my father's sayings. But what about the jump?”

“It happened. Feel it?” Garr placed Boba's hand flat against the bulkhead, and there it was: the oscillating hum of the ship's null quantum field generators. “The jump came just after I

## Terry Bisson

grabbed the handhold and pulled us into the airlock. We barely made it!”

“Close call,” said Boba as he hung up his space suit. “But I guess a meter is as good as a kilometer.”

“Another of your father’s sayings?” asked Garr with a laugh.

“Where were you two?” asked Ulu Ulix when Garr and Boba got back to the Orphan Hall. His three eyes were flashing fire; he was angry. “You know there’s a general alarm before a jump. You were supposed to report in.”

“Sorry,” said Boba. “It was my fault. We were at the rear observation blister. I, uh, wanted to see what the stars look like from hyperspace.”

“I appreciate your honesty, Teff,” said Ulu Ulix, softening. “But rules are rules. You two are restricted to the Orphan Hall for one day. No more roaming around.”

“No, please!” said Garr. “We’re ten! We can’t spend all our time with a bunch of little kids.”

“Apparently one of the airlocks was opened,” said Ulu Ulix with a teasing smile. “You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you? You should be more careful. If you get caught breaking the rules, you’ll get me in trouble with Master Glynn-Beti. And that’s the last thing I want!”

“That’s also the last thing *we* want,” Boba said quite honestly.

After that sullen day, if Garr ever wanted to find Boba, Garr knew where to look.

The rear observation blister. The ROB.

Boba was watching and thinking. He knew he should understand what secret Dooku thought he possessed. He remembered how bothered Dooku had been when Boba called him Tyranus. Why was that so important?

Then suddenly—finally—Boba understood. Tyranus had hired his dad to help create an army of clone troopers. But now

Count Dooku was fighting the army he'd helped create. Why would you make an army and then fight against it? Boba still had a puzzle, but he was now sure he held an important piece—the piece Dooku had wanted to destroy. As Count Dooku, the man was fighting against the Republic, but, as Tyranus, he had helped create an army for that same Republic.

Boba decided to hide that information deep inside him for the moment. He had his father's instinct for knowing it would come in handy later on. It was part of his father's legacy to him...for better or for worse.

“Boring,” said Garr the next day, staring out.

Boba had to agree. Hyperspace looked like a clumsy child's drawing of a universe, a first draft.

“Those streaks are stars?” Garr asked.

“Stars smeared across space-time,” said Boba. “When we drop out of hyperspace, they will look more like stars.”

“Like the orange one?”

Boba looked up from his book *Operational Starfighters*. He had been watching the tiny, flickering orange star for days, almost lost amid the smears.

“It's not a star,” Boba said to Garr. “If it's not a streak, that means it's matching our speed exactly. Following us, maybe.”

*Curious*, he thought. He wished he could see it better.

“We'll find out soon enough,” said Garr. “Ulu Ulix sent me to get you. We're getting ready to jump out of hyperspace, and we're supposed to be secured in our quarters.”

“Let's go, then,” said Boba. The last thing he wanted was trouble with Ulu Ulix or his Jedi Master, Glynn-Beti. “Gotta keep them happy!”

The jump was uneventful. Just a weird lurch, a moment's dizziness.

## Terry Bisson

The orphan kids' moods improved immediately. Boba and Garr went to the commissary for their first untroubled meal. Lunch after hyperspace was like breakfast after a long sleep. Everyone was buzzing with excitement.

"We must be near Bespin."

The announcement would come from the bridge soon. Hyperspace jumps were a little unpredictable, but only a little.

After lunch, everyone went forward to the main observation blister, or MOB, to see the stars. Everyone except Boba. He went alone, back to the ROB.

*That tiny star; there was something about it...*

He picked up the viewer and scanned the sea of stars for the little orange light.

It no longer stood out, like it had in hyperspace.

But he found it, just where he had thought it would be, directly behind the *Candaserri*.

Boba zoomed in for a better look. It was a ship. It was tiny, and it was several kilometers away, but clearly matching speed and course with the *Candaserri*.

Following. Shadowing. *What for?*

The orange color came from the glint of starlight on the rusty, battered hull.

The familiar hull.

Boba wiped his eyes. Could it be that he was overtired, just seeing things? He dialed the zoom, bringing the little ship closer, until he could see the stubby wings, the scratched cockpit, the pitted sides. He could even see the pits that had been put into the ship while flying through the asteroid belt on its way to Geonosis.

He lowered the viewer from his eyes. They were filled with tears, at the same time that his fists were clenched with fury.

For the ship was one he knew well. It was his legacy from his father, and it had been stolen from him by Aurra Sing.

It was *Slave I*.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Hey, Teff, what’s up?”

“Not much, Garr.” Boba put down the viewer and turned to face his friend, who had just entered the ROB. *Keep your emotions to yourself.* “Just stargazing.”

“See anything interesting?”

“Nothing much,” said Boba. “Star dust, space trash, you know.”

“Well, come on, then,” said Garr. “Ulu Ulix has been looking for you. The Padawan wants us to help strap down the little ones for arrival.”

“Arrival?”

“We’re going into orbit around Bespin. Trip’s over. Welcome to your new home!”

*Home? Not if I can help it!* thought Boba as he picked up his flight bag and followed his friend.

The forward observation blister was filled with crew members and orphans, gazing with wonder at the planet the ship was orbiting.

It was huge. It glowed orange in the light of its distant sun.

## Terry Bisson

“Bespin is a gas giant, with its metallic surface so far under layers of atmosphere gunk that it’s hardly been reached, much less explored!” Garr said excitedly. “The main industry is mining Tibanna gas from the atmosphere. Nothing lives on the surface. All the cities and mines and factories float in the clouds, and...hey!”

“Huh?”

“You’re not listening, Teff!”

“Oh, sorry,” said Boba.

“Daydreaming?”

“I guess.”

Daydreaming? Not exactly. Boba’s mind was racing; he was thinking about the startling discovery he had just made in the rear observation blister.

*Slave II* He had seen it. The little starship he had inherited from his father, Jango Fett, was following the *Candaserri*—and being careful, Boba had noted, to stay in the shadow cone, where it would not be picked up by the assault ship’s approach sensors, which were probably tuned to pick up flotillas, not solitary craft.

Boba was pondering this information silently while he stood beside Garr in the crowded forward observation blister watching stormy Bespin spin below.

“There you are!”

Boba and Garr saw Ulu Ulix pushing through the crowd.

“You two are determined to get me into trouble, aren’t you! Don’t you know you’re supposed to stay near the Orphan Hall?”

“Sorry,” said Garr, hiding a grin. While Ulu had been busy, they had the run of the ship, and they had taken advantage of it.

Boba didn’t like Jedi, but Ulu was an exception. He decided to ask the Padawan about what he had seen—without, of course, revealing too much. “Ulu, have you ever heard of a bounty hunter called Aurra Sing?”

“Aurra Sing? Sure. She’s—”

“Why do you wish to know?” asked a harsh, high voice. Boba turned and saw Glynn-Beti looking at him suspiciously.



Boba groaned. If he had known she was around, he would have kept his mouth shut. “Uh...”

“Speak up, orphan. *Teff*, isn’t it? Why do you ask about Aurra Sing?”

“I was just wondering. I, uh, heard some crew members talking about her.”

“She is an enemy of civilization, of galactic order,” said the Bothan Jedi. “She is wanted for numerous crimes, high and low, including murder. That’s all you need to know. Ulu Ulix—” Glynn-Beti glared at her Padawan. “What are these two doing so far from the Orphan Hall? Are you forgetting your duties? Take them there *immediately*.”

Ulu bowed. “Yes, Master Glynn-Beti.”

“Gather the other orphans. And all of you, meet me in the docking bay as soon as you have packed your things. We’re being ferried down to Cloud City.”

“Yes, Master,” said Ulu, bowing again to the departing Bothan’s back.

“Whew!” said Garr, when Glynn-Beti had left. “What was that about?”

“Aurra Sing,” said Ulu Ulix. “Don’t mention her name around Glynn-Beti. Glynn-Beti condemns her, and for good reason. Aurra Sing kills Jedi for sport.”

“I thought bounty hunters only worked for money,” Boba said.

“Aurra Sing is different,” said Ulu Ulix. “It is said that she has some sorrow in her past that causes her to hate the Jedi. Whatever it is, she attacks us every chance she gets.”

“You mean, for fun?” asked Garr, shocked.

“Sick fun,” said Ulu Ulix. “But come on, you two. Let’s get moving.”

## Terry Bisson

*That explains it, thought Boba, as he followed Garr and Ulix back toward the rear of the ship. Aurra Sing is trailing the ship to get a crack at a Jedi or two. Good luck to her!*

*I wonder what she would think if she knew I was on board.*

The ship's corridors were filled with crew members hurrying to their stations. Planetary approach was an exciting event to all hands—except, of course, to the clone troopers. One planet or another, it was all the same to them.

Boba wouldn't miss them. His brothers—so much alike, and yet so different. They had no interest in where they were going, or where they had been. They were interested only in their weaponry, in their assignments, or in their chain of command. The clones were pure military.

So when he arrived at the docking bay, helping Ulu and Garr herd the younger orphans onto the lander, Boba was surprised to see his old friend CT-4/619 hard at work. He was painting out the emblems of war and the military numbering on the little lander that was going to take the orphans down.

"Remember me?" Boba asked.

"Not really," said CT-4/619. "Should I?"

"No, just wondering," said Boba. "What are you doing?"

"De-militarizing," said the clone.

"How come?" Garr, who was always curious, asked.

"Bespin," said CT-4/619. "They want no signs of war."

"The rulers of Bespin want to preserve their planet's neutrality," said Glynn-Beti. The Bothan Jedi had approached unseen. As always, she made Boba nervous. "We are allowed to bring you orphans down, but not to carry any weapons or engage in any military activities."

"Not even your lightsaber?" Boba asked, indicating the Jedi's weapon hidden under her robe.

## **STAR WARS: Crossfire**

“The weapons of the Jedi Masters are not subject to local ordinances,” Glynn-Beti said with a haughty scowl. “Now come aboard!”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The lander dropped free of the *Candaserri* and fired its retros, slowing it for atmospheric entry. The twenty-one younger orphans, strapped into their seats, shouted with glee and excitement as the lander encountered the first wisps of air.

The faint whistling sound grew to a roar as the little ship dove into the sea of clouds. It was terrifying and exhilarating. The orphans oohed and aahed as the clouds whipped by, all reds and yellows, oranges and browns.

Far off, Boba saw the flash of lightning. “A storm,” said Garr, who was, as usual, full of information. “The storms on Beshin are the deadliest in the galaxy.”

But the storm was soon left behind as the little ship sailed down, down, down...into the middle levels of the atmosphere, where the inhabitants of Beshin all lived.

Boba usually liked planetfall—descending to a new planet. But this time he had mixed feelings.

He was eager to begin the search for Aurra Sing, who could not be far away.

At the same time, he knew he would miss life on the *Candaserri*. He had been forced to live a lie, as “Teff.” But in return he had been granted, for the first and only time in his life,

a friend. Someone to spend time with, to explore with, to talk to and share secrets with (only up to a point, of course).

It had all been a great pleasure—but now it was time for Boba to return to his real identity.

He was the son of Jango Fett, the toughest bounty hunter in the galaxy.

And he intended to get his ship back!

They landed at Portside, in the teeming central levels of the city. Uniformed officials appeared at the opened ramps of the ship and asked Glynn-Beti for documents.

Glynn-Beti handed over a holopad, pointing at the younger orphans who were lined up at the doorway—and then at Boba.

She whispered something to the officials, and they looked at Boba. One shook his head; another nodded.

*What is she telling them?* Boba was alarmed. He had planned to wait and make his escape from the orphanage as soon as no one was looking; but what if he never got there? What if Glynn-Beti was telling them to check his identity first?

Boba edged toward the open ramp. The Jedi and the officials had their backs turned. If he slipped out now he could disappear into the crowd before anyone knew what was happening. It might be several minutes before they even noticed he was gone.

There was only one problem. How could he leave without saying good-bye to his first, and still only, real friend?

The choice was between friendship and freedom.

Boba chose freedom.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

“Teff!”

He couldn’t believe it—Garr had betrayed him! His best friend was yelling, alerting the Jedi!

Boba ducked his head and ran, darting through the crowd.

Portside was a maze of narrow alleys, lined with shops where stolen goods and weapons, illicit spice, and phony documents; all were on sale to anyone with credits.

It was a perfect place to disappear.

Boba looked back and saw an official running after him. But she was easy enough to lose—a couple of sudden reversals, a turn down a narrow alley, and Boba had faded into the milling polyglot crowd, where a hundred languages filled the air with a low buzz.

*Made it!* He slowed, and forced himself to breathe easily so that no one would notice that he was on the run. He was invisible, because nobody (or no creature) notices a ten-year-old.

Except another ten-year-old.

“Teff!” A hand caught his shoulder.

Boba turned, fists up, in a fighting stance, ready to defend himself against all the Jedi in the world, as well as their security droids, clone troopers, officials, or...

It was Garr.

"You forgot your flight bag," Garr said, handing Boba the precious legacy from his father.

Boba was amazed. Had he been that confused, that panicked? That was breaking the bounty hunters' code for sure, which was to remain calm in every situation.

Boba dropped his fists to his side. "Thanks," he said, taking the bag from Garr.

"Why are you running?" Garr asked. "They are going to send us to a nice place, I'll bet."

Boba didn't say anything; he didn't know where to start.

"Glynn-Beti is going to be mad now. We'd better get back, quick, before—"

"Garr!" Boba grabbed his friend by the arm. "Come."

"Where? What for?"

"Just come. I'll explain!"

Cloud City's central levels were open, at the edges, to the wind and air. Dragging Garr by the hand, Boba headed toward a park lodged up against a transparisteel barrier that looked down on a sea of streaming clouds. From here it was easy to see why Cloud City was considered one of the most beautiful cities in the galaxy.

"What's this all about?" Garr asked as Boba parked himself on a bench and pulled his friend down beside him. "Teff, talk to me!"

"In the first place," said Boba, "my name's not Teff."

"It's not? What is it then?"

Boba didn't want to tell another lie, but he didn't want to tell the truth either. "Never mind that," he said. "I have something more important to tell you."

"You're not an orphan?" Garr guessed.

"I'm an orphan all right. Just not a needy orphan wanting to be rescued by the Jedi."

"But why not? If they want to help out..."

"I told you my father was dead, but I didn't tell you how. He was killed by the Jedi. I saw it happen."

## Terry Bisson

Garr gasped. "Was your father...bad?"

"Bad? He was *good*," said Boba, his voice rising.

"But the Jedi are good," said Garr. "They are the guardians of peace and..."

Boba began to see how hopeless it was. Garr would never understand.

"It was a misunderstanding," said Boba. "But because of it, I can't stay with the Jedi."

"You can stay with me!" said Garr. "My parents will be returning for me soon, I know they will! They will take you in. We can be brothers. Or brother and sister. Or whatever."

Boba shook his head. "You are truly my friend," he said, "but I can't afford to have friends. I have my own road to travel, alone. I must go my own way."

"But..." Garr's big brown eyes were filling with tears.

"We must say farewell," said Boba.

"Good!" came a voice that was at the same time familiar and frightening. For the second time that day, Boba felt a hand on his shoulder. Only this one was cold, with a grip like steel.

"Boba Fett."

Boba turned, slowly, because of the hand that pinned his shoulder. He saw bone-white skin, black eyes rimmed with kohl, a muscular but womanly figure in a red jumpsuit, and a shaved head topped with a single long lock of bright red hair.

And blazing angry eyes.

"Aurra Sing!" It was the bounty hunter who had captured him and stolen his ship. "I knew it! I saw *Slave I* following the *Candaserri*."

Boba tried to twist away but Aurra Sing held his shoulder tight. Then Garr started kicking her. "Let go of him! Take your hands off him!"

"Who's this?" Aurra Sing asked, picking up Garr by the hair, so that the kicks only afflicted the air. "Do I kill it or just toss it over the side?"



She held Garr out over the railing, suspended by a lock of hair over a thousand kilometers of empty air.

“Neither!” said Boba, finally twisting free. He put his hands on his hips and faced Aurra Sing defiantly. “Garr is my friend. As you are not. What is it you want with me?”

“I want to make you an offer you can’t refuse,” said Aurra Sing. With a quick toss, she dropped Garr back on the bench.

“Ooooph!” said Garr. “What’s going on here? Who are you? Who is Boba Fett?”

“Your little friend is too nosy,” the bounty hunter said to Boba, without looking at Garr. “You and I have business, so tell him to make himself scarce.”

“Go,” Boba said simply to his friend. He tried to keep his voice cold. That was the only way to get Garr to leave. “I told you, I have no room for friends. You heard what she said. Disappear.”

Garr resisted. When Aurra’s hand moved to her blaster, Garr was convinced.

“Good-bye,” Garr said sadly in farewell.

Boba allowed himself to say a heartfelt good-bye back. Though his heart felt real pain, that was it.

“What is this offer?” Boba turned to Aurra Sing and demanded as soon as Garr was gone. “All I want from you is my ship back.”

“Then we’re in agreement,” said Aurra Sing. “That’s what my offer is—your ship back.”

“*Slave I*.” Boba’s eyes were wide with hope and excitement. “Where is it?”

“Not here.” Aurra Sing’s eyes scanned the other beings on the terrace. “Too many eyes and ears. There is a city called Tibannapolis, not too far from here. Meet me there at noon tomorrow.”

“And if I don’t?”

“You will, if you want to see *Slave I* again,” said Aurra Sing. She tossed Boba a coin. “Here—a good faith offering. It will rent

## **Terry Bisson**

you a cloud car, which you will need to find Tibannapolis. Look for me near the ancient refinery known as Revol Leap. If you show up with Jedi or officials, the deal's off. You'll never see your precious ship again. Now I have to tend to business."

Then, with a flip of her topknot, and without a word of farewell, she was gone.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

One hundred credits.

Boba checked the prices, and found out that he had barely enough to hire a cloud car, with enough left over for a meal, as long as it was a small one. He dragged it out as long as possible, wondering what he was going to do to pass the time until his meeting with Aurra Sing. He knew he'd have to avoid the Jedi who might be looking for him—and he wondered why Sing would want to give him back his ship. She must want something in return, or was it a trap? And what if she were caught by the Jedi? Unfortunately, he couldn't exactly turn her in himself.

Noon tomorrow—it seemed like a long time away. But it wasn't. Bespin turned so swiftly on its axis that the days were only twelve hours long. Boba barely had time to grab a nap on a park bench before it was time to go.

The cloud car was a neat little item: two open-cockpit cabs, or nacelles, attached by a three-meter-long shaft that held the repulsorlift engines. Boba chose to ride in the cockpit with the driver, a short and prickly Ugnaught, a native of Bespin—or so Boba thought.

## Terry Bisson

"You from around here?" he asked, just to make conversation...and maybe learn a thing or two about the planet he was now stuck on.

"We were brought here by Lord Figg," said the driver. "He gave us our freedom, in return for our labor building Cloud City. We are eternally grateful to him for..."

The Ugnaught driver droned on, but Boba was more interested in studying the cloud car's simple controls: a ring that was pushed in for down and pulled out for up, or twisted for turns.

*I could fly this thing better than him!*

As Cloud City dwindled into the distance, and the cloud car darted in and around the multicolored towers of fog and vapor, Boba began to appreciate the exotic beauty and appeal of Bespin. The atmosphere was buoyant and thick, so it required little energy to fly or to float. Things fell slowly, when they fell.

Evolution had produced thousands of forms of small, colorful life, which fed on one another with happy abandon. Boba saw larger creatures, too. Great floating sacks, with amorphous forms and shifting colors. They were herded by men on bat-like creatures.

"Wing riders," said the cloud car driver. "Riding on Thrantas. Not native to Bespin. But then few of us are. We Ugnaughts were actually brought here by..."

"You already told me," said Boba.

"Sorry," said the cloud car driver. "It's just that we have found our freedom here, and we are eternally grateful to the..."

"You already told me," said Boba. He looked out the window. "There. What's that?"

The cloud car was spiraling down through a scrim of clouds. Below, Boba saw a huge, round, rusted eck of metal and plastic, floating at a tilt.

"Tibannapolis," said the driver. "I'm out here at least once a week."

It looked to Boba as if the entire abandoned city were scraps on a plate, about to slide off into the garbage can. “Why would anyone come here?” he wondered.

“Souvenir hunters,” said the driver.

“Can you tell me where Revol Leap is?”

“I can do better than that,” said the squat little Ugnaught. “I can take you there.” Instead of weaving in and out of the ruined buildings, he dove under the city. Looking up, Boba could see rusted remains of the Tibanna processing factories and mines. The flat bottom of the floating city was covered with algae, and plants that fed on the algae, and floating beasts that fed on the plants, and plants that fed on the beasts that fed on the plants.

*This is a harsh universe*, Boba thought to himself. *I must follow my father’s example and become harsh also.*

Revol Leap was at the city’s edge—a section of tower as jagged as a broken tooth that hung out over the emptiness.

Suddenly—a spot of orange, a sleek nose, a stubby wing, a familiar beloved shape...

*Slave I.* There it was! Idling on a warpout deck under the twisted spire of the Leap.

And standing next to it was Aurra Sing.

She looked as fierce as ever, with her red hair gleaming in the dim light that filtered through the clouds. *Mad at the galaxy*, Boba thought. *But why?* That kind of anger seemed more of a hindrance than a help.

*Remain calm at all costs* was Jango’s way. *And it will be my way, too*, thought Boba.

As the cloud car slowed, hovered, and landed, Boba was surprised to realize that he was glad to see Aurra Sing.

It had been nice to have a friend like Garr. But what good was a friend you have to hide the truth from?

Aurra Sing wasn’t a friend, far from it; but at least she knew who Boba was.

## Terry Bisson

“Want me to wait?” the driver asked as he landed, the little cloud car scraping on the steel with a harsh sound.

“No,” said Boba, pulling out his flight bag and throwing the driver his last credits. “Keep the change.”

“Hey, thanks, pal,” the Ugnaught said. Boba realized he had overtipped him. But what did it matter? *Slave I* was back!

He waved at Aurra Sing. She of course didn’t wave back. Too busy scowling at the galaxy. Boba wondered what would happen if the galaxy scowled back—

And suddenly it did.

CRACK! CRACK!

Two laser bolts hit near Aurra Sing. Another hit near the cloud car.

The Ugnaught driver jumped out of the cloud car and ran for the safety of a nearby building. Aurra Sing stood her ground and looked up. Boba ran to her side and followed her glance.

A Bespín sky patrol skimmer was diving out of the clouds, firing at *Slave I*.

“You betrayed me!” Aurra Sing cried. She reached under her robe and drew out a blaster. Then she backed toward the *Slave I*.

“Wait!” Boba said, running after her. “I didn’t tell them anything. How can you be so sure it’s the Jedi anyway?”

Aurra Sing grinned as she opened the cockpit. “Who else would be trying to kill me? And failing so miserably?”

Boba scrambled up behind her. “Now we can get away.”

“Sorry, kid, the deal’s off!” Aurra Sing said. “When you told the Jedi where we were meeting, you blew it.”

“I never told anyone anything! It wasn’t me!” Boba threw his flight bag into the ship. The engines were already idling. Aurra Sing grabbed Boba and hurled him from the vehicle. He hit the steel deck of the floating city so hard that it knocked the breath out of him. Before he could get back on his feet, she’d closed the ramp, fired up the turbos, and taken off.

Boba barely had time to jump free, dodging the blistering exhaust.

“Come back!” He looked up. *Slave I* was rising into the clouds, with the sky patrol craft close behind. The battle was on. Both ships were firing now, streaking the sky with tracer blasts.

Boba wanted to be part of the fight. He wanted to be at the controls of his ship again. *But how?*

With his eyes on the sky, he backed up, clenching his fists in frustration.

Then he remembered the cloud car.

Pull for UP, push for DOWN. Piece of cake.

Boba took off in hot pursuit of the sky patrol craft, which was in hot pursuit of *Slave I*. In space, he knew he wouldn’t have a chance of catching up. But in the thick atmosphere of Bespin, all vehicles were relatively slow.

The cloud car was ridiculously easy for him to fly. And sweetly maneuverable. Boba felt his blood drumming an excited beat. It was great to be back at the controls of a ship, even a little tourist hauler.

Boba was falling behind, so he took a shortcut through a cloud. He had guessed right: he came out above *Slave I*, where Aurra Sing couldn’t see him. She had slowed to a near hover.

She was planning something.

Boba watched as Aurra Sing slipped into a bank of clouds, as if to lie in wait. And soon he saw what she was waiting for.

The sky patrol craft cruised into view, circling the cloud, scanning the horizons for Aurra Sing. Little did its pilot know that the pursuer had become the pursued, and that Aurra Sing was preparing an ambush.

Holding his breath, Boba watched the sky patrol craft drift past the cloud. Any moment now, there would be a blast of laser fire, and the broken pieces and shattered crew of the patrol craft would fall slowly into the depths of Bespin’s atmosphere, where they would all be crushed flat, lost forever in the toxic soup of heavy gases.

## **Terry Bisson**

*Good riddance!* Boba thought. Then, as the craft drew nearer, he saw who was in it. There at the controls was a Bespin pilot while Glynn-Beti gave orders. Beside her was Ulu Ulix, and beside him, Garr.

*So it was Garr who betrayed me! Garr must have told the Jedi everything! But still...my friend. No doubt thinking this would help...*

A few more meters and they would all be in Aurra Sing's sights.

There was no time to think. Boba pushed the ring forward and dove, faster and faster. He cut in front of the patrol ship, surprising it and throwing it off course, just as Aurra Sing's laser bolt fired—



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

—and missed, by centimeters.

The little cloud car might have been small, but it was also amazingly fast. With the sky patrol craft in pursuit, Boba dove down under the city and threaded the cloud car into the forests of dangling algae, where it was all but invisible among the thousands of strands, some of which were hundreds of meters long.

The patrol craft was right behind. After a quick look around, though, it left, presumably to resume the search for Aurra Sing. *Wonder if they know I saved their lives*, Boba thought. He didn't regret it, though he wondered if it had been the smart thing to do. If he had let Aurra Sing blow them to pieces, he would perhaps be with her now, in *Slave I*.

Now, here he was in the weeds. Nowhere, with nowhere to go. A ten-year-old boy in a stolen craft. No money, no friends; he didn't even have his precious flight bag.

*What was that?*

Boba wasn't the only one hiding in the weeds. *Slave I* was cruising through, slipping silently among the hanging fronds. Was Aurra Sing hiding from the sky patrol craft or chasing it? It was impossible to tell.

## Terry Bisson

The cloud car had no comm unit. But what did it matter? Boba was sure Aurra Sing wouldn't talk to him anyway. She was convinced he had betrayed her—and even though she was wrong to think he had told the Jedi where to find her, he had betrayed her by spoiling her ambush.

*If she sees me, she'll run. Or worse, blast me.*

If only I could sneak up on her, Boba thought. And then, watching her drift slowly toward the edge of the platform, he thought of a way that he could.

Keeping the cloud car hidden in the hanging fronds, he followed *Slave I* across the underside of the abandoned city. It was clear now that Aurra Sing was hiding from the Jedi. She was hovering, barely using her jets. Had she lost her nerve?

Boba knew that as soon as the Jedi were gone, she would be hitting her turbos, blasting for space.

*If this is going to work, I have to make my move now*, he thought. It meant taking a chance, but Boba was getting good at taking chances.

She was drifting past. Boba waited, with his hand on the edge of the cloud car's open cockpit, until *Slave I* was directly underneath.

Then he stood up.

And stepped over the edge, into the open air.

As he fell, slowly at first, then faster and faster, Boba watched the ship below.

It was tiny; Beshpin was huge.

If he missed, he would fall for a thousand kilometers, until his skull cracked in on itself like an egg.

If he missed, but he hadn't allowed for the sideways drift of *Slave I*. He only missed by a few meters. He saw the shock on Aurra Sing's face when she saw him fall past. He could only imagine the look of horror that she saw on his.

Then he heard the WHOOSH as she fired her turbos, and dove underneath him. He heard the *click/whrrr* as she opened the entryway and positioned herself beneath him, like a net.

OOOMPH! Boba hit on the flight bag he had thrown in earlier; the battle helmet and the book made it hard as a rock.

The entryway closed.

*Safe!* Boba grinned—until he saw Aurra Sing’s scowl.

“If I didn’t know you were the son of Jango Fett,” she said, “I would swear you were trying to keep the Jedi alive by spoiling my little surprises.”

“I just want my ship back,” said Boba. “I don’t care who you kill.” That was a sort of lie—Boba didn’t want her killing Garr, or even Ulu. But it was close enough.

“Fair enough,” said Aurra Sing. “So let’s switch seats.”

“Huh?”

“You know how to fly this thing, right? And I’m a better shot than you. We’re going to have to work together to get out of here.”

Boba didn’t have to be told twice. Picking up his flight bag, he scrambled forward to the pilot’s chair. It felt good to have his hands back on the familiar controls of *Slave I*.

“Now take us up and out. Let’s see if our friends are still there.”

They were.

K-RANG! KA-RANG!

Boba dodged laser bolts from two sides. The sky patrol craft had been joined by starfighters from the *Candaserri*. This was their chance to catch the bounty hunter who had attacked so many Jedi.

Aurra Sing fired back, but the shots were wild. Boba threw the little ship into a roll, and dove into a cloud.

“Let’s grab some vacuum!” Aurra Sing said. “Head for space.”

“Not with those starfighters on our tail!” Boba shouted. “There’s no place to hide up there.” He had counted at least four from the *Candaserri*. The Jedi had called for reinforcements, and gotten them.

## Terry Bisson

“Well, we’re not exactly invisible here!” Aurra Sing yelled back. “We’re surrounded—and there’s a storm coming. These Bespín storms are deadly.”

*Maybe that can work to our advantage*, Boba thought.

He checked the radar imagery. There it was—a monster storm, towering from the bottom levels of the atmosphere, all the way to the lower reaches of space. It was streaked with lightning, and it spun like a supersonic top.

“Hang on!” Boba cried. He spun *Slave I* out of the cloud, into the middle of the waiting Jedi starfighters.

KA-RANG!

KA-RANG!

Boba threw the little ship into a shimmy, dodging laser bolts as it streaked across Bespín’s cloud-stacked sky, with four—no, six—no, eight!—starfighters and a Cloud City sky patrol tight on its tail.

“Now you’ve done it!” cried Aurra Sing. “They’ve all seen us.”

“Not for long,” said Boba, thinking of his father as he headed straight for the lightning-stitched storm cloud. “Nobody follows where we’re going!”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Total darkness.

Then blinding light.

*Slave I* shook and spun and creaked and groaned.

The turbos were useless. Nothing could match the power of the storm. The ship went where the storm sent it, which was down, down, down—

*Slave I* was designed to withstand the high vacuum of outer space, not the tremendous atmospheric pressures of a gas giant like Bespin. A crack appeared in the cockpit canopy; Boba smelled an acrid, toxic stench.

“We’re breaking up!” cried Aurra Sing. “I thought we were heading for space!”

“Me too,” answered Boba.

Both their voices were soon drowned out by the screaming of the wind. Boba stood the ship on end and hit the turbos, holding on for dear life. *Slave I* shook, it rattled, it rolled and spun and tumbled end over end. The lightning crashed over them in huge breaking waves, like a surf of light.

Boba saw Aurra Sing’s face reflected in the viewscreen, and for the first time she looked more terrified than angry. The sight scared him. He knew that he looked even more scared.

Then, suddenly, it was over.

## Terry Bisson

The silence was more terrifying than the noise. Boba knew that he was dead—he saw stars everywhere.

Cold, tiny, silent stars.

“We made it,” said Aurra Sing. “Good flying—for a dumb kid.”

Boba didn’t bother to answer. He was weak with relief. They had made it. *Slave I* was in space. The plucky little starship had climbed the spinning walls of the storm, all the way into orbit around Bespin. No one had dared follow.

“We need to talk,” said Boba. He was exhausted, but he felt a new confidence. “This is my ship. I want it back. Now.”

“Later,” said Aurra Sing, laughing. “There are other planets in this system where we’ll be less conspicuous. Unless you want to wait here for the *Candaserri* to spot us?”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“Your father and I were not exactly friends,” said Aurra Sing, once they were in orbit around a small dark planet, a sister to Bespin, which was still visible as a tiny globe in the distance. “Bounty hunters don’t have friends. But I respected him. He was the real thing. No sentimental attachments, no loyalties.”

“Like you?” Boba asked.

“Sort of—and sort of like you,” Aurra Sing went on. “You’re developing some of his better qualities. Not that I care. Our paths have only crossed out of my necessity.”

Boba wondered what this meant. “Let’s uncross them, then,” he said. “This is my ship. Pick a planet, and I’ll put you off; we’ll say farewell.”

“And good riddance, too,” said Aurra Sing. “But first we have a job to do together. You and me and your father, Jango Fett.”

“My father?”

“He was richer than anyone realized. He left credits and treasure stashed all over the galaxy. It’s yours, Boba. All you have to do is pick it up.”

“Where?” Boba asked. His heart was pounding with excitement.

## Terry Bisson

Aurra Sing smiled. "Several places. I happen to know where they all are. That's why we're a team. I have the coordinates and you have the codes."

"Codes? I don't have any codes."

"Your DNA and retinal scans are the codes. Your father made sure the treasure could only be accessed by his son."

"Why should I trust you? How do you know all this?" Boba asked. "You already stole my ship once, and betrayed me to Dooku."

"Trust me? You'd be a fool to trust me. Do you think I trust you?! You're Jango Fett's son, after all. We're going to get the treasure and split it, fifty-fifty. That's it, kid. Then you're on your own."

"Fifty-fifty? But it's mine!" Boba wondered if he would even see the fifty she was promising.

Aurra Sing smiled. "What choice do you have? Unless you want to wait for someone else to find the treasure."

Boba also wondered if Aurra Sing knew that Jango Fett had tens of thousands of sons. *Does she know that all she has to do is kidnap a clone trooper? But what was that his dad used to tell him? That he was the only unaltered clone?*

"Okay," said Boba. "It's a deal. We're a team—for now."

"Everything's 'for now,' kid," said Aurra Sing. "So let's head for the first site. We can catch some shut-eye in hyperspace. I'll punch in the coordinates while you look the other way. And I mean the other way!"

As soon as the jump was made and they were in hyperspace, Aurra Sing went to sleep, snoring loudly.

Boba sat on his flight bag and watched the stars streak by. He was tired too, but he felt cautiously good. He had his ship back and his flight bag. He was on his way to get the rest of his father's legacy. He had made a friend, even if it was a friend he would never see again.

He had escaped Count Dooku...but for how long? And in Aurra Sing's company, he would be doubly pursued by the Jedi.



## **STAR WARS: Crossfire**

Aurra Sing was certainly no friend. But she was useful. And at least he could trust her—to be untrustworthy!

Boba Fett knew he would have to remain on guard.







# STAR WARS<sup>®</sup>

## *BOBA FETT*™

MAZE OF DECEPTION

ELIZABETH HAND





## PROLOGUE

The Dream is always the same. Boba Fett always thinks of it as *The Dream*, because it's the only one he ever remembers. The only dream he ever *wants* to remember.

In The Dream, his father, Jango Fett, is alive. He is showing Boba how to handle a blaster. The dull gray weapon is much heavier than Boba thought it would be.

"Like this," Jango says. He is not wearing his Mandalorian helmet, so Boba can see his father's brown eyes, coolly intelligent but not cold, not when he is looking at his son. When his father holds the blaster it looks weightless, a deadly extension of Jango's own hand. He hands the weapon to Boba, who tries hard to keep his hand steady as he holsters it.

"Always make certain your grip is tight," Jango goes on, "or else an enemy can knock it from you. Like this—"

A quick motion and the blaster falls from Boba's hand. Boba looks up in dismay, expecting a reprimand, but his father is smiling. "Remember, son—trust no one, but use everyone."

That's when Boba wakes up. Sometimes his father's message is different, and sometimes the weapon is different. A dartshooter, say, or a missile. But one thing never changes.

Boba always wakes from The Dream. And his father is still dead.





## CHAPTER ONE

“Boba! Downtime’s over! I need you—we’re in final approach.”

Boba looked up groggily from where he’d been asleep in *Slave P’s* cockpit. Beside him, where once his father would have sat at the starship’s controls, the bounty hunter Aurra Sing was hunched over the console. She was staring at the screen. It was filled with symbols that were meaningless to Boba Fett—the coordinates of their precise destination remained scrambled.

“Yes!” Aurra Sing murmured triumphantly. “We’re almost there.”

She looked aside at Boba. Quickly he turned away. He wasn’t supposed to know where they were going.

That was part of the deal. Aurra Sing would bring the two of them here, following the coordinates she had discovered in *Slave P’s* databank. The coordinates were part of a complex system—a treasure map, really—that detailed where Boba’s father had stored a vast fortune in credits and precious metals, all across the galaxy.

Jango Fett had been a bounty hunter—an extremely *successful* bounty hunter. He had been an extremely clever one, too. Trained as a great Mandalorian warrior, Jango had learned the most important lesson of all: *Prepare for the worst*. And so he had

## Elizabeth Hand

made certain that his young son, Boba, would have access to his fortune after his death. The fortune could never be obtained by anyone else, because the access code was programmed so that only Boba's retinal scan and DNA could obtain it. Since Boba was the sole *unaltered* clone of his father, he and he alone shared Jango's pure genetic material.

But Boba did not know where the fortune was. Only Aurra Sing knew that, because she had accessed the records on his father's ship. The ship that should have been Boba Fett's now.

Boba looked warily at the person next to him. Her topknot of flaming red hair brilliant against dead-white skin. Her eyes blazing as twin suns.

"She is one of the deadliest fighters I have ever known," Jango had told Boba once, years before. "She was trained as a Jedi, but for some reason she hates them more than she hates anyone in the galaxy—and that's saying something! Don't ever cross her, son. And above all, don't *ever* trust her."

Boba Fett certainly didn't trust her. Who would? Aurra Sing was as thin and muscular and fine-boned as a Kuat aristocrat, but as deadly as a Mentellian savrip. She was a solitary hunter and a lethal predator.

*Like my father. Like I could be*, Boba thought. His glance turned admiring—though he was too smart to let Aurra Sing see *that*!

"Get ready for descent," she snapped as she punched in the final landing codes. "Soon you'll start making yourself useful to me, kid!"

The coordinates were still scrambled. But earlier, while Aurra Sing was momentarily distracted, Boba had peeked at the screen and stolen a glimpse of the itinerary data. They were somewhere in the Core Worlds. A long way from Bespin and Cloud City, where he'd met up with Aurra. Boba knew about the Core Worlds from overhearing his father's conversations. It was a good place to buy weapons—a good place to buy *anything*, now that he thought about it. Maybe a good place to outfit *Slave I*—once he got rid of Aurra Sing.

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He didn't know the name of their actual destination, and he couldn't read the planet's coordinates, but he could see it on the monitor. A medium-sized planet, as gleaming and faceted as a green-and-gold jewel. He glanced at Aurra Sing, but she was busy with the landing program. He looked back at the planet on the screen. A string of unintelligible numbers and letters scrolled across it, and then a single phrase that he could understand.

AARGAU. LANDING ACCESS GRANTED.

Aargau. So that's where they were going.

*Too bad I've never heard of it.* Boba sighed. The landing restraints chafed his arms. When he tried to get more comfortable, Aurra Sing glared at him.

"You want to get out now?" she said, and gestured at the dumping bay. "It can be arranged!"

Boba gritted his teeth, forcing himself to smile apologetically. "Sorry."

*Don't trust her,* his father had said. But Boba had struck a deal with her. He had agreed—reluctantly—to split the treasure with her, fifty-fifty.

He had no choice. He had no money, no credits, no possessions except for his flight bag, his father's Mandalorian helmet, and *Slave I*. He had no friends out here, wherever *here* was. And he had no friends anywhere. Even when he had the chance of having a friend, he soon lost it.

He had only himself to rely on: an eleven-year-old with his father's training, his father's split-second reflexes, his father's fighting instincts—and his own talent for survival.

"Ready?" barked Aurra Sing. It was a command, not a question.

"Ready," said Boba, and he readied himself for their final descent to Aargau.

## CHAPTER TWO

Aargau wasn't the first planet Boba Fett had ever visited, or even the second. For a kid, Boba had seen a lot of planets in a short time. There was gray, cloud-swept Kamino, his homeworld, where months could pass and you'd never see anything but sheets of silvery rain, and hear nothing but the pounding of wind and water. There was Geonosis, a vast desert planet that glowed beneath its orange rings, where Boba had buried his father; and Bogden, a small planet orbited by so many moons it looked like part of a gigantic game of Wuur-marbles.

And there was the *Candaserri*. The Republic troopship *Candaserri* wasn't a planet, of course, but it had seemed almost as big as one to Boba. On *Candaserri* he'd run into the hated Jedi, though not Mace Windu, the Jedi Knight who had killed Boba's father.

Still, except for the Jedi, *Candaserri* hadn't been so bad. It certainly wasn't as disgusting as Raxus Prime, the galaxy's toxic dumping ground, where Boba Fett had last encountered the Count. He always thought of him as "the Count," because the Count had two names—Tyranus and Dooku. Boba's father had always told his son, "If anything should happen to me, find the Count. He'll know how to help you."

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As it turned out, the Count had found Boba first. The Count hired Aurra Sing to bring Jango Fett's son to him—for safekeeping, the Count assured Boba. Aurra Sing had kept *Slave I* as part of her payment, which Boba didn't think was fair—it had been his father's ship, and by rights it should be Boba's ship now.

But you didn't argue with the Count, any more than you argued with Aurra Sing.

*Not if you expected to live, anyhow*, Boba thought as he waited for *Slave I* to make its landing on Aargau. The Count was a tall, imperious man with icy eyes. Like Aurra Sing, he had been trained as a Jedi—although unlike Aurra Sing, the Count had finished his training and had once been a Master—which made him even more dangerous. And like Aurra Sing, the Count now hated the Jedi. When Boba first heard his father talk about the Count, Jango referred to him as Tyranus. It was Tyranus who had recruited Jango Fett as the source for the great clone army created on Kamino. In appearance, every clone trooper resembled Jango Fett as an adult.

But only Boba Fett resembled his father as a real boy. Unlike the clone troopers, Boba's DNA had not been genetically enhanced. He grew at a normal rate, not at the accelerated rate that the clones did. Boba thought the clones were sort of creepy. They were cool, because they could fight better than any droid army, but they were strange, too, because they looked so much like his father.

The Count was even creepier. Especially since Boba knew the Count had two identities.

Tyranus had created the clone troopers now used by the Republic, while Dooku was on the side of the Republic's enemies: the Separatists. Two men on opposing sides—but they were both the same person!

And only Boba Fett knew that. He smiled now, thinking of it. *Knowing a secret is power*, his father had always told him. *But only if it remains your secret.*

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“Ready,” muttered Aurra Sing. Around them the starship shuddered with the force of reentry. “And—*now!*”

Through the screen in front of them he had his first glimpse of Aargau. The planet’s surface was invisible. All he could see was one single, impossibly huge pyramid, rising like an enormous shining steel spike from the mists of cloud far, far below.

“What’s that?” asked Boba in awe. He had never seen an artifact that vast. “Is it—is that where people live?”

Aurra nodded. “Yes. Aargau is run by the InterGalactic Banking Clan. They’re sticklers for organization and control. So a large part of the habitable portion of the planet is one gigantic pyramid. It’s divided into seven levels. The upper level is the smallest, of course, so security can check all visitors coming and going. Then as you go down, you find administration, then the banks and vaults and treasuries. The merchant and living levels are below these.”

Boba peered down. He could see lines zigzagging across the stepped levels of the pyramid. There were blinking lights, glowing canyons, and brilliantly colored tunnels everywhere across the pyramid’s surface.

“Wow! It’s like a big maze,” he said admiringly.

“That’s right. Droids are programmed to find their way around all the levels, but people can spend years memorizing the access codes and charts, and still get lost. They say that if you get off on the wrong level, you can spend your entire life wandering around and never find your way back to where you started.”

*Cool!* thought Boba. He glanced furtively at Aurra Sing. Once he had his share of his father’s fortune, maybe he could lose Aurra in this planetary labyrinth, regain control of *Slave I*—and regain his freedom, too. He felt in his pocket for the book his father had left him. It was the possession that Boba treasured above all else, except for his father’s Mandalorian helmet.

The helmet was safe in Boba’s sleeping area. But the book he had recently decided to keep with him always. It contained information and advice that his father had recorded for him. In a

## STAR WARS: Maze of Deception

way, it was like having a link to his father, even though Jango Fett was dead.

But Boba didn't want to think about that. Once he had made certain the book was where it should be, he turned his attention back to the screen.

*Slave I* was approaching the top of the glittering pyramid. Far below, Boba could see flickers of light, green and red and blue. It made everything look like part of a gigantic circuit board. He pointed to where the deepest reaches of the planet sparkled brilliantly.

"What's down there?" he asked. "At the very lowest level?"

"That's the Undercity, kid. They say that anything goes down there—if you can find your way."

She leaned back in the command seat, grinning as the ship's computer finally made contact with the planet's security force. On the screen in front of her, green letters scrolled—not the scrambled coordinates, but letters that Boba could read clearly.

WELCOME TO AARGAU  
YOU ARE NOW ENTERING A NEUTRAL ZONE

"Hah!" said Aurra Sing. She unfastened her safety harness and stood, shaking back her topknot mane of red hair. "Neutral zone! No such thing!"

"What do you mean?" asked Boba. He slid from his chair and followed her to *Slave P's* docking bay.

"I mean nobody's ever neutral. Not really. Everyone and everything has a price—you just have to figure what it is." Reflexively she checked her weapons, then glanced at Boba. "I guess you're ready—all we need is *you*, after all. Let the bank check your identity and hand over the money!"

She grinned, then punched in the code to open the starship's outer doors. "Come on, kid—let's go get rich!"

## CHAPTER THREE

Boba quickly decided that Aargau was definitely the cleanest planet he'd ever been on. The docking zone was like the inside of a gigantic holoscreen, with flashing lights and low, brightly colored buildings. The streets were broad and empty of any vehicles, except for a couple other airspeeders that had recently landed. There were few people or droids that he could see. Not even his father's spartan apartment on Kamino had been as clean as this!

And everything was bathed in red light—a harsh light that made Boba's eyes sting.

"Is the atmosphere this color?" he wondered.

Aurra Sing shook her head. "No. That's from special infrared rays," she explained, as they clambered out of *Slave I*. "Aargau has human-standard atmosphere. Every level is color-coded. It's supposed to make it easier to find your way around. It gives me a headache."

"Me, too." Boba rubbed his eyes. "So this level is red?"

"That's right. Infrared rays help disinfect incoming ships—and visitors. Aargau has a *lot* of rules."

Several uniformed soldiers walked among the other ships at the docking site. Even in uniform, with their faces hidden by their helmets, Boba recognized them. They were clone troopers,



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members of the clone army created by Count Tyranus. Aargau was part of the Republic, which would explain why the clones were here. In one of the other docking bays, Boba recognized a Republic gunship. That was where the clone troopers would have come from.

But why was a gunship here? Was it refueling?

Boba watched as the troopers drew nearer. It was a weird feeling, seeing the clones again. Boba knew that every one of them had his father's face. His father's eyes, his father's mouth—but not his father's smile. Because the clones rarely if ever smiled.

Boba could see Aurra Sing tensing as the troopers approached them. But they only nodded politely. They gave a cursory look at *Slave I*, then moved on.

"They didn't search us," said Boba in surprise. He glanced back at the troopers. "Or the ship."

Aurra shrugged. "Not really their job. They're fighting battles, not checking cargo. Anyway, nobody bothers smuggling anything *into* Aargau. Too affluent. They've got a saying—'Better poor on Aargau than wealthy anywhere else.' This is the bank for the whole galaxy. There's enough precious metals in vaults on Aargau to outfit an entire army a thousand times over."

"Really?" Boba grinned slyly to himself. If the bank here was that rich, would it even notice if a few bars of gold were missing?

As though she could read his thoughts, Aurra Sing added, "It's easy getting *onto* Aargau. Getting *off* is more difficult—you don't want to know what they do to people they catch trying to smuggle stuff off-planet." She turned and gave him a nasty grin. "Don't even *think* of double-crossing me, kid. All they have to do is suspect you of smuggling, and you're history. 'Cause who is an officer going to believe? An adult or a kid?"

*Not just a kid—a bounty hunter's kid*, thought Boba, and scowled. But he said nothing.

"So just you stay with me," Aurra Sing hissed as they headed toward a large, shining console desk. An immense holosign

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flickered in the air above it. The holosign had a scrolled message that repeated itself over and over and over again in a hundred different languages.

WELCOME TO AARGAU,  
JEWEL OF THE ZUG SYSTEM!  
OBSERVE THE FOLLOWING RULES:

I. NO UNLAWFUL REMOVAL OF PRECIOUS METALS

II. NO POSSESSION OF WEAPONS EXCEPT BY AARGAU CITIZENS

III. NO WILLFUL CONSPIRACY TO DEFRAUD, DISCREDIT, OR DECEIVE THE BANK OF AARGAU

THE ABOVE CRIMES ARE PUNISHABLE BY  
IMMEDIATE EXECUTION

Boba glanced at Aurra Sing. She would have a little trouble with Rule Number II, he thought.

But Aurra Sing didn't bother to read the rules. She strode right through the holosign and into Customs Central. Boba hurried to catch up with her.

"Welcome to Aargau," said the attendant at the Customs Central console. She was humanoid, with the telltale gauntness and pallid skin that marked her as a member of the InterGalactic Banking Clan, from Muunilinst. She wore an expensive-looking, gold-and-silver plasteel suit. Its buttons looked like real platinum, with insets of blinking, emerald-colored gavrill eyes. She held up a small retinal scanner, directing it first at Boba's eyes, then Aurra's. After the scan was complete, she glanced back down at the device's readout. Her expression betrayed nothing.

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“May I ask the purpose of your visit?” she asked.

“I am this boy’s guardian, appointed by his family to see that he gets the education he deserves,” Aurra lied. Boba winced at the thought of being related to her. “We’re here to check on the status of his High-Yield Universal Institutional Savings Account.”

“Very good.” The attendant smiled blandly. “And may I see proof of your investment?”

For a moment Aurra Sing said nothing. Then she slid a small shiny card across the desk toward the attendant. Boba’s eyes widened: The card had to be encoded with the access information to his father’s secret fortune!

Aurra Sing looked at the attendant and said, “I think you’ll find everything you need there.”

The attendant slipped the card into a new scanner. The scanner beeped and blinked. The attendant read the information display.

“Yes,” she said. She looked over at Boba. “You are Boba Fett?”

Boba nodded and the attendant smiled. “With this kind of card, I’d guess you’re quite a wealthy young man!”

“Yes,” Boba agreed. But he certainly didn’t feel—or look—wealthy! He glanced down at what he was wearing. Blue-gray tunic over blue-gray pants, knee-high black boots. Standard-issue stuff, not the way a rich kid would dress.

Would that make any difference to the security people here on Aargau? The security attendant certainly didn’t seem to care. She glanced again at the shiny information card Aurra Sing had given her, still in its slot on her desk.

She said, “As first-time visitors to Aargau, you are cleared to visit Levels One through Three. That is where off-world banking accounts and precious metals are stored. Your own credits will be on one of those levels. Once you have withdrawn your credits or metals from your account, you may purchase clearance to Levels

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Four and Five. Level Four is where you can arrange for lodging, and Level Five is where you can buy supplies.”

“What’s on Level Six?” asked Boba.

“Entertainment and recreational facilities.”

Boba grinned. “And Level Seven?”

The Customs attendant gave him a cool smile. “Level Seven is the Undercity. A young person like yourself would have no business there. We encourage free trade, of course, so we don’t restrict merchants or traders from anywhere in the galaxy. As a result, you can find some very shady characters in the Undercity. It is terribly dangerous, especially with the recent skirmishes against the Separatists. The Republic has sent a peacekeeping force to make certain that its investments remain protected.”

She continued to gaze at Boba, and went on. “You must also be sure not to exchange your money with anyone who is not a licensed member of the InterGalactic Banking Clan. There are black market money changers on Aargau. It is illegal to do business with them. If you’re caught, you will be deported immediately. And you *will* be caught. Do you understand?”

Boba nodded seriously. “Yes,” he said.

Beside him, Aurra Sing fidgeted impatiently. “Thanks,” she said. She started to reach for the info card. “Now, if you don’t mind—”

But before she could move, the attendant raised her hand. Seemingly out of nowhere, several S-EP 1 security droids appeared and swarmed toward the desk. They were followed by a third droid that made Boba’s heart pound in fear and amazement—

An IG assassin droid.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Boba heard Aurra suck her breath in sharply. Behind the desk, the attendant made a slashing motion with her hand. The assassin droid stopped. Slowly it raised one arm.

Its lasers were pointed right at Aurra Sing!

Instinctively the bounty hunter went into a defensive stance. “Call it off!” she ordered the attendant.

But the attendant only shook her head. “I told you,” she said in her calm voice. She was staring at Aurra’s blaster. “You’ll have to leave your weapons here.”

“Not on your life!” Aurra Sing said. She reached for her blaster. But she stopped abruptly when she saw the assassin droid reach for its concussion grenade.

“Oh,” said Aurra. She withdrew her hand from her blaster. “Sorry! I guess I overlooked that detail. I was so busy with everything else I was thinking about.”

Aurra looked at Boba and smiled—a smile that was more like a grimace. “Right, Boba?”

“Yeah,” said Boba. He hoped the grin he gave the attendant didn’t look as fake as Aurra Sing’s. “We were so excited about finally landing here, we just forgot!”

The attendant turned away from Aurra to smile indulgently at him. “I’m sure you did.”

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*Boy, are grown-ups dumb!* thought Boba. He knew that the weapons check was the only thing that could separate him from Aurra—right away.

“But you still must leave your weapons here,” the attendant went on. She looked back at Aurra Sing—only this time she didn’t smile. “The penalty is death. This is your last warning.”

Aurra Sing scowled. “I never go anywhere unarmed.”

“Didn’t you read the planetary bylaws?” The attendant began to recite in a monotone. “No unlawful removal of precious metals. No possession of weapons except by Aargau citizens—”

Aurra cut her off quickly. “Can I leave them on my ship?”

The attendant nodded. “Very well. But you will have to be escorted by Security Personnel.” She gestured to the uniformed security guards who stood watching from a few feet away. In the distance, Boba saw other uniformed figures milling about. Some had their faces hidden behind helmets; others were bareheaded.

“I need a Sigma Red escort,” the attendant announced into her comlink. “She has permission to return to her ship,” she said to the droids, and made another slashing gesture.

At the attendant’s command, the droids retreated. At the same time, two of the uniformed security guards walked over to the desk.

“Is there trouble here?” one of them demanded. He looked suspiciously at Aurra Sing.

Boba felt his heart start to pound again.

What if they were *both* forced to leave Aargau before he got the fortune his father had left for him? He’d be as bad off as he was before. Worse, actually—because he’d be stuck with Aurra Sing!

But Aurra seemed to be thinking the same thing. Her expression suddenly grew calculating. She gave the security guard the same fake smile she had given the attendant a minute before.

“I’m cooperating, officer,” she said. But the look she gave Boba was anything but glad.

## STAR WARS: Maze of Deception

The clone guard continued to watch Aurra suspiciously. The attendant looked at her, too. She pointed at Aurra Sing.

“Please escort her back to her ship,” the attendant said.

The guards flanked the bounty hunter, one on either side.

“See that her weapons are properly stowed away on board,” the attendant went on. She looked at Aurra. “Once you have done that, the guards will escort you back to this desk. Then I will give you your final clearance, and you can access the other levels here on Aargau.”

Aurra Sing glared at the attendant. She looked at the attendant’s uniform: She was wearing a blaster.

“What about you?” snapped Aurra. “You’re armed!”

“Don’t you listen?” the attendant asked in disbelief. “Citizens may carry arms. In fact, it is unlawful for citizens of Aargau to *not* carry weapons.”

Aurra Sing turned to stare at Boba. “What about him?” she demanded. Aurra pointed at Boba angrily. “Why aren’t the guards on him?”

The attendant looked at Boba. He made sure to appear as young and innocent as possible—this was the chance he’d been looking for. The attendant shook her head, almost in sympathy for the boy.

“He is not armed,” she said in her calm voice. “On Aargau, free citizens may come and go as they please, once they have received clearance. This boy has received clearance. And he has broken no rules. He can decide for himself.”

She turned to Boba. “Boba Fett. Do you want to accompany your guardian to the ship? Or do you want to remain here?”

*Freedom!* “I’ll wait here,” he said, trying not to let his excitement show.

For a moment he thought Aurra would lunge at him. But then she seemed to think better of it. After all, would a real guardian attack her charge?

“You better wait!” she snapped. “I’ll be right back, so you better not move!”

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The guards stood beside her, glaring. Aurra turned.

“Let’s get this over with,” she said. She started walking toward *Slave I*, a guard at either side.

But when they reached the docking bay she looked back at Boba one last time. Her face was calm, but he could see the rage in her eyes.

Still, when she was out of sight, Boba couldn’t help grinning to himself. At last. He was on his own.



## CHAPTER FIVE

Boba stared at the shadow that was *Slave I*, waiting in the docking bay. He could no longer see Aurra or the guards.

But he liked looking at the ship—*his* ship. The Mandalorian helmet his father had left him was still on board, where Boba had stored it, safe from Aurra Sing. He wished now that he had thought to bring the helmet with him. It had saved his life when he wore it, back on Raxus Prime.

And, with the helmet on, he could be mistaken for an adult. That could be useful, sometimes.

But other times—like now—it was also useful to be a kid. No one expected a kid to be as smart as Boba was, or as self-sufficient. No one expected a kid to know that Dooku and Tyranus were the same person.

And no one expected a kid might have plans that didn't include a parent or guardian. Especially a guardian like Aurra Sing, who was only using him—and would get rid of him the moment she didn't need him anymore. He had no doubt about that.

Boba knew he only had a very short time until Aurra returned from the ship. When she got back, he would have to go with her to one of the lower levels to get his father's fortune. Boba knew

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she could not be trusted. If she had the chance, she would double-cross him.

*And she has no right to the money at all, Boba thought angrily. My father intended that fortune for me! Not some other bounty hunter—and especially not Aurra Sing!*

But without Aurra, he had no way of knowing where to find his father's treasure. It was somewhere here on Aargau—but where? The attendant had said it would be on one of the first three levels—but each level was enormous. Without any credits, Boba might as well be back on toxic Raxus Prime.

He sighed loudly. Then, remembering where he was, he turned a little worriedly and looked at the attendant in her boring Banking Clan uniform.

He expected her to be watching him. Isn't that what grown-ups did? Watched you all the time, so you couldn't move, or even think, on your own? Boba hated it, just as much as his father had hated any kind of supervision, by the Bounty Hunters' Guild—or anyone else.

But the attendant seemed to have forgotten all about Boba Fett. She stood behind the desk with her back to him. She was talking into a communicator and scanning a computer screen. Boba had just started to turn away again, when something shiny on the desk caught his eye.

The info card! Aurra Sing had forgotten to take it back!

It was still in its slot on the desk, gleaming softly in the harsh red light.

"Wow!" Boba whispered to himself in excitement.

If he could get it, he might be able to use it to locate his father's fortune!

Boba looked around furtively. Across the plaza, the security droids hovered near a bank of turbolift doors. On the other side of the plaza, a group of uniformed guards stood at ease, talking. Several people wearing clothes that identified them as members of the Banking Clan were walking toward the desk.

## STAR WARS: Maze of Deception

In a minute they would be here. The attendant would turn to greet them—

And Boba would lose his chance! Quickly, he reached across the desk. For an instant his hand hovered above the shining card. Then, quick as lightning, he grabbed it.

*That was easy!* he thought. He glanced at the desk. The attendant still had her back to him—but as he watched, she began to turn.

Quickly, Boba put his head down.

*Don't run*, he thought, even though every nerve in his body was firing *RUN!*

*Don't look back*—even though every second he imagined the attendant noticing and shouting at him to stop. He began to walk away, as fast and as silently as he could. He crossed the plaza, his head still down, his sweating hand clutching the shining card. He headed toward the turbolifts that descended to the lower levels.

*Don't look back*, he kept repeating to himself. *Don't look back!*

But more than anything, that was what he was dying to do—look back, and see if Aurra Sing was leaving *Slave I*.

Any minute now she would return.

He forced himself to keep going. It was one of the hardest things he'd ever done. Boba's instinct, always, was for action—to run, to fight, to outwit anyone who tried to stop him. But right now, only silence and stealth would save him.

And the ability to blend in. To *not* draw attention to himself.

Boba stared at the floor beneath him, cold and red and gleaming, clean as everything on Aargau was clean. Maybe twenty meters ahead of him was the wall, and the rows of huge turbolifts. What was it the attendant had said about them? Boba tried to remember.

*As first-time visitors to Aargau, you are cleared to visit Levels One through Three. This is where off-world banking accounts and precious metals are stored. Your own credits will be on one of those levels.*

Boba's hand tightened around the shining card he had snatched from the desk. If it gave him access to his father's

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credits, he could get it all for himself—and leave Aurra Sing out of the deal completely!

The thought made Boba hopeful. Then, suddenly, from behind him came footsteps.

“Hey,” someone called. “You—!”

Boba’s throat grew tight. His hope faded. He had forgotten one of the first rules of bounty hunters—stealth.

He had let himself be seen.

“You!” the voice came again—a familiar voice. “I said, wait!”

Boba’s heart was hammering inside his chest. He looked straight ahead, to where the wall of turbolifts loomed. They were just a few yards off now. There were a lot of doors, but one of them should open soon. If he sprinted, he might make it—or he might be captured by whoever was behind him.

Boba didn’t look back. His hand clutched the shiny card—the key to what was rightfully his. His heart was pounding so hard his chest hurt. A few steps ahead of him he could hear the grinding sound of more turbolifts moving upward. They slowed to a halt as they approached the Security Level.

“Hey—!”

The voice came again, directly behind him!

*Run!* thought Boba.

He sprinted the last few steps. Immediately before of him, a line of green lights blinked above another turbolift door.

“*Approaching Security Level One,*” a mechanized voice announced. “*Please stand back from the doors.*”

Boba jumped forward. In front of him, the green lights turned to red. Someone touched his shoulder. Boba stared straight ahead, his heart thumping. The turbolift doors slid open.

“*Security Level One!*” the mechanical voice repeated. “*Please let passengers out.*”

Dozens of people hurried from the turbolift. Boba darted between them, until he was inside. He was breathing hard. But he was alone in the turbolift!

“You!” shouted the same, strangely familiar voice.

## STAR WARS: Maze of Deception

Boba whirled.

*“Now leaving Security Level One,”* said the mechanical announcement.

The doors began to slide shut. There were only inches left before it closed.

Boba let his breath out. He was safe!

With a cry a small figure lunged through the gap. The turbolift doors hissed shut. Quickly, Boba shoved the shining card into his pocket. Then he backed up against the wall and faced his pursuer.

He was trapped!

## CHAPTER SIX

Boba had his back to the wall. His hands tensed to fight—  
But fight who? Or *what*? Boba let his breath out in shock.

Because for a moment, he thought he was staring into a mirror. He saw his own face, his own body, his own hands raised protectively. Even the clothes were the same—same gray-blue tunic, same high black boots. The only difference was that the boy staring at Boba Fett wore a helmet.

But it wasn't a clone trooper's helmet, or a Mandalorian helmet. This was a tan helmet with gold-plated metal fittings. Boba had seen thousands like it, back on his homeworld of Kamino. It was a learning helmet, part of the equipment clone youth wore to enhance their training.

Boba was staring at his clone twin!

The two of them looked warily at each other, keeping their arms raised in a fight posture. After a minute, the clone shook his head. He held his hand out to Boba. For the first time Boba saw that he held something.

"You dropped this," the clone said. He offered it to Boba. "Up there, by the security desk."

Boba looked at it in disbelief. It was his book—the book his father had left him. Boba shook his head. Finally he took it from the other boy.

## STAR WARS: Maze of Deception

“Thanks,” Boba said. He’d been so busy trying to leave before Aurra Sing returned that he’d forgotten he had the book with him. He looked at the boy and ventured a smile. To his surprise, the boy smiled back.

“I thought it might be important,” the clone said. “I’m glad I caught up with you.”

Around them the turbolift descended smoothly, silently. Above the door a stream of blinking lines and numerals indicated that they were slowly approaching Level Two, thousands of meters below the first level. Boba put the book back into his pocket, beside the shining card. The boy clone looked at him curiously.

“You’re not wearing a helmet,” the clone said. He tapped at his own helmet. “Are you an odd or even?”

“An odd or an even?” Boba repeated. “What do you mean?”

Then he remembered.

All young clones were numbered. All young clones wore learning helmets like the one worn by the boy in front of him. The only difference was that some of the learning helmets had gold-colored hardware. Others had plain black metal hardware. Odd-numbered clones wore gold. Even-numbered clones wore plain.

This boy’s helmet had gold plating. He was an odd. He was still staring at Boba, patiently waiting for a reply.

“Oh,” said Boba at last. “I’m, uh, same as you. Odd.”

The boy clone nodded seriously. “Is your helmet getting repaired, too?” He tapped his own helmet, making a face as a burst of static came out of the earpiece. The noise was loud enough that even Boba could hear it.

“That’s why I’m here,” the clone went on. “I should have remained on board with the others. But my helmet has been malfunctioning. Our commander said it would be faster to just get it repaired here, down on the Tech Support Level.”

“Tech Support?” said Boba.

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“Level Three. That’s where all repairs are done.” He looked at Boba and, for the first time, frowned slightly. “You should know that. Your helmet really *must* have malfunctioned.”

Boba knew that the learning helmets provided a constant stream of data that the young clones absorbed. Some of the information was spoken through the earpieces. Some of the information was visual, streaming across the small screen that protruded from the helmet to cover this boy’s left eye. Clones developed at twice the speed of normal humans. They grew twice as fast, and by using the learning helmets, their brains developed twice as fast, too.

“That’s right,” said Boba slowly. “I was on my way down to see if it’s been repaired.”

The clone nodded. He smiled again, and Boba wondered if his friendliness might be a result of his malfunction. Clones were usually not very emotional.

And even though there were hundreds of thousands of them, they were always alone.

*Like me*, thought Boba in mild surprise. For the first time he smiled back.

“I’m 9779,” said the clone. “What designation are you?”

Boba thought fast. “1313,” he said.

“I’m from Generation Five Thousand,” the clone went on. “Is that your Generation, too?”

“Uh, yeah,” said Boba. He hoped he wouldn’t have to answer any more questions. Still, he was curious himself. He asked, “Why are all the troopers here on Aargau?”

“You mean us?” 9779 looked surprised. “You better get your helmet fixed if you forgot that! There are rumors that Separatists are here on Aargau. This is a neutral planet, but we clone troopers are supposed to keep an eye on them. Just in case of trouble.”

*Just in case*, Boba repeated to himself. He wondered why the army would’ve brought a clone whose training was not complete.



## STAR WARS: Maze of Deception

This had to be *part* of the training—going to a relatively stable world to learn how to patrol and defend.

“We are now approaching Level Two,” the turbolift’s mechanical voice intoned. “Please stand back from the doors.”

9779 obediently moved aside. Boba started to head for the door before it opened, but the clone stopped him.

“Did you forget?” 9779 asked, his face serious. “We’re going to Level Three. Got to get your helmet back!”

“Oh—” Boba stammered. “I, uh—”

But then the doors began to open. And Boba didn’t have to worry about *just in case of trouble*.

Because trouble had found him. Standing outside the turbolift was—

Aurra Sing!

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Boba darted to one side, behind 9779. The clone stood, oblivious, as a small group of people waited to get into the turbolift with them. In the front of the little crowd stood Aurra Sing, her face dark with anger. When she saw 9779, she gave a low laugh of triumph.

“Gotcha!” she crowed, and lunged for the clone.

“Hey—!” said 9779, confused, as Aurra Sing grabbed his arm.

“Sorry,” said Boba under his breath to the clone. “But this is my stop.”

Other people were crowding into the turbolift now. Before Aurra Sing could spot him, Boba squeezed between the newcomers, out onto Level Two. Behind him he could hear the clone’s protests getting louder.

“—let go of me! I’ll have you deported!”

“I told you to wait for me!” said Aurra Sing furiously. “Did you think you’d get that money for yourself?”

*That’s right!* said Boba to himself. He moved quickly away from the turbolift. *That’s exactly what I thought!*

The mechanized voice made its final announcement. Then the sleek metal doors closed, and the turbolift descended once more.

Boba was on his own again.

Just how he liked it!

## STAR WARS: Maze of Deception

He quickly checked to make sure he still had his father's book and the data card.

He did. He smoothed his hair, wishing again that he had his Mandalorian battle helmet to help disguise his appearance. He wasn't sure if he wanted to be mistaken for a clone again—next time he might not be so lucky. He turned and began to look around.

He was in a long, shimmering green tunnel. As a matter of fact, everything around him had a greenish glow—the walls, the floor, even the people.

And there were people everywhere. Thousands of them! He saw representatives of every race he could imagine—Gotal, Twi'leks, Dugs, Ithorians, and many more—as well as beings he didn't recognize at all. Mingled among them was an occasional clone trooper. They were easy to recognize in their sleek white body armor. Even they had a green glow on Level Two.

But mostly, he saw members of the InterGalactic Banking Clan. They were tall, thin figures in distinctive drab uniforms. Their faces were dead-white, their cheeks sunken like those of San Hill, who Boba had seen on Geonosis. Boba knew they never ventured outdoors. They spent their entire lives inside, managing their vast stores of currency.

*If I was rich, I wouldn't waste my life indoors,* Boba thought.

*No—not IF I was rich—*

*WHEN I'm rich!*

He put his hand in his pocket. He touched the smooth card that would lead him to the treasure.

If only he knew how to find it!

But where to start?

Boba frowned. Then he heard the mechanized turbolift voice behind him.

*Now approaching Level Two.*

Uh-oh. The first thing he better do was get away before Aurra Sing discovered his deception. He looked around.

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Level Two was much bigger than Level One. There was a central area—that was where Boba was standing now. And, extending out from this central area, there were tunnels. Hundreds of them, shining green tunnels with moving walkways. A nonstop stream of people went in and out of the tunnels. They stepped onto the walkways, which led them away.

Where did they go?

Boba walked a safe distance from the busy turbolift area. He went toward one of the tunnel entrances. There was a sign above it.

### FIRST ROYAL BANK OF M'HAELI

Boba turned and looked at the next tunnel.

### BOTHAN INDEPENDENT TREASURY

“Huh,” he said. He looked at another tunnel, and another.

### N'ZOTH BANKS ONLY REGISTERED BANK OF AMMUUD, CORPORATE HEADQUARTERS

“Banks,” murmured Boba to himself. “They’re all banks.”

That’s what the tunnels were. Every tunnel led to a bank, or treasury, that belonged to a particular planet. He turned slowly in a circle, looking at all the tunnels stretching in every direction.

There weren’t just hundreds of them. The galaxy contained untold numbers of planets. Even if only some of these had representative banks on Aargau, there might be *thousands* of them!

How could he ever figure out which one held his father’s treasure?

Boba fingered the card in his pocket. Around him a steady flow of people went by. No one paid him any attention. After a minute he put the card back into his pocket, and slowly took out his father’s book.

## STAR WARS: Maze of Deception

It wasn't just a book, though. Boba walked over to a quiet spot a short distance from one of the tunnels. There he opened the black book.

Inside there were no pages. There was a message screen. The first time he had opened it, after his father's death, he had seen his father's face and heard his father's words.

"There are three things you need, now that I am gone," his father's image had said. "The first is self-sufficiency. For this you must find Tyranus to access the credits I've put aside for you. The second is knowledge. For knowledge you must find Jabba. He will not give it; you must take it. The third and the most important is power. You will find it all around you, in many forms.

"And one last thing, Boba. Hold on to the book. Keep it close to you. Open it when you need it. It will guide you when you read it. It is not a story but a Way. Follow this Way and you will be a great bounty hunter someday."

*Hold on to the book.* Boba bit his lip in remorse and anger. How could he have left it up on Level One? If it weren't for Clone 9779—

Boba shook his head. No time for remorse now.

*But, he thought, if I ever see that clone again, I owe him a favor. A really, really big one.*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Boba looked around. He could barely see the turbolifts from here—too many crowds. That meant Aurra Sing would have trouble spotting him, at least for a little while. He glanced from one tunnel to the next, all of them glowing silver-green in the eerie light of Level Two.

Did one of them hold the treasure?

It was like a puzzle. Or no—it was like a labyrinth. A maze. And beneath this level was another level, and then another, levels upon levels extending for kilometers to the surface of Aargau, where the Undercity was. Even if he ever claimed his credits, how could he find his way around? Would he be able to get back to Level One and his ship?

Mazes upon mazes. His father had told him once about being captured and imprisoned in an underground labyrinth on Belsavis and another time on Balmorra. A deadly scorpionlike kretch insect hunted him through the tunnels.

“How did you escape?” Boba had asked breathlessly.

“By keeping my head,” his father replied. “Mazes are designed to confuse you. To disorient you. But mazes always have an inner logic. Someone had to design them, after all. If you can stay calm and think, you can always find your way out—if you have enough time.”

## STAR WARS: Maze of Deception

Boba shook his head. He looked at the vast number of tunnels around him.

No one had enough time to check out every one of them!

He glanced down at the book, still in his hands.

*Open it when you need it*, his father had said.

*Well, I sure need it now!* thought Boba. He opened it.

The message screen was gray and blank. But slowly, as he stared down at it, letters appeared.

NEVER SEEK OUT HELP, the screen read.

Boba read the message over and over. Finally he closed the book and put it back in his pocket.

*Never seek out help.* He looked around at the thousands of silver-green tunnels. If he didn't ask for help here, how would he ever find his way?

"Excuse me," said a small voice beside him.

Boba jumped, his hands thrust out in a fighting posture. Next to him was a little figure, not even as tall as he was. It had a vaguely donkeyish face, pale yellow in color, with large pointed ears that swooped out from either side of its head like wings. It wore plain yellow homespun pants and a vest over a matching yellow shirt. Its hands and face were covered with short, soft fur.

It was a Bimm, Boba realized. A native of Bimmisaari.

"I could not help noticing that you seem a bit confused," the Bimm went on in its singsong voice. "May I be of assistance?"

"Uh," stammered Boba. Then he remembered what his father's book had said.

*Never seek out help.*

Boba glanced nervously, across to where the turbolifts were discharging more passengers onto Level Two.

Could that flash of red and white, fast as crimson lightning, be Aurra Sing? Or was he just imagining it?

The Bimm said, "I am Nuri. An independent money exchanger." Nuri gestured at the teeming crowds around them. "It is confusing, is it not? Especially when one is a first-time visitor to Aargau. Might this be your first visit?"

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Boba looked at Nuri suspiciously. But the Bimm's singsong voice was friendly, his small bright eyes warm and welcoming. Besides, Boba was a whole head taller than the little alien. Reluctantly, Boba admitted, "Ye-e-es—it is my first visit."

The Bimm nodded wisely. "I thought so. Much of my business consists of helping people like yourself. Making their time here easier. Visitors from all over the galaxy come to Aargau—"

Nuri swept his little hand out. A group of brightly dressed Mrissi swarmed past them, their brilliant feathers peeking from long robes. Close behind them a group of security guards paced watchfully in formation. Behind the guards were more members of the Banking Clan.

This group, however, seemed different from the others of the Clan. Boba stared at them, frowning. There were more heavily armed guards, for one thing. And a number of security droids—lots of S-EP1s. In the middle of them all walked a very tall, very thin man with a face lean and sharp as a razor. Two lieutenants flanked his sides.

"That is San Hill," said Nuri in a low voice. "He is the head of the InterGalactic Banking Clan."

"He looks like a big stick insect," said Boba, not wanting the Bimm to know he'd seen San Hill before.

Nuri tried to hide a smile. "Perhaps. But he is one of the most powerful men in the galaxy. His presence here, now, is very interesting indeed."

The two of them turned and watched as the procession disappeared into one of the eerie green tunnels.

When they were gone, Nuri said, "But enough of that!" The Bimm put a small, furred hand upon Boba's shoulder. "Tell me, what is the nature of your business on Aargau?"

Boba started to reply. But the words stuck in his throat. From the corner of his eye he had seen another flash of red and white, darting across the far side of the crowded level.

This time, there was no doubt that it was Aurra Sing.



## CHAPTER NINE

The Bimm's face creased with concern. "What is it?" he asked.

Boba said nothing. He started to move very slowly back, going into a half-crouch. Nuri turned and let his gaze flick across the crowds moving everywhere around them. After a moment he drew his breath in sharply.

"You have made an impressive enemy, young man," he said in his fluting voice. On the far side of the great space, Aurra Sing's muscular figure could be glimpsed. She was standing near the turbolifts, scanning the area with her keen eyes. Nuri glanced at Boba, then took a step back to stand beside him. "A bounty hunter! And not just any bounty hunter, but the legendary Aurra Sing!"

Boba looked down at the Bimm. He was surprised to see that the little alien did not look frightened. Instead, he looked impressed.

That made Boba feel a bit better. "Yes," he said. "I, uh—I had some business with her. You see, I'm a bounty hunter, too. Or will be, when—"

The Bimm raised one small, furred hand. "You need say no more. *My* business is your welfare. But I suggest we discuss that elsewhere!"

## Elizabeth Hand

Quickly, the Bimm grasped Boba's arm. "This way," Nuri said. He pointed to a small, dark passage a short distance away.

Boba glanced back over his shoulder. Aurra Sing was gone. A security droid now stood where she had been.

"Oh, no!" Boba said under his breath. He felt a stab of panic. Aurra could be anywhere, behind anyone....

He had been careless. And his carelessness could cost him his fortune—or his life.

"Quickly!" whispered Nuri. "Come—"

Boba hesitated. He didn't know anything about this small, pointy-eared alien. Nuri looked harmless enough, but—

But Boba had no choice. If he remained here, he'd be playing hide-and-seek with Aurra Sing, with a bunch of clone troopers for an audience.

"Okay," said Boba. He followed Nuri toward the dark passage. "I'm coming."

Unlike the other tunnels, this one was narrow and dim. It had a low ceiling and rounded walls. There was no blinking sign overhead to identify it. A small panel was set into one wall beside the entrance. The panel had a lot of buttons on it. Nuri pressed the buttons in a pattern Boba tried to follow. An instant later the wall slid open to reveal a second, hidden passage.

"This way," said Nuri. He ducked into the passage, with Boba at his heels.

The door closed behind them. Boba straightened, blinking. They were in a small, circular room. Instead of the eerie green light that colored everything on Level Two, the light in here was soft and yellow. Soothing, like Nuri's voice.

"Where are we?" asked Boba.

The Bimm stared up at him. His bright black eyes narrowed. "I will answer your questions in a moment, my young friend," he said in a low voice. "But first, you will have to answer mine."

Boba swallowed. His hand moved protectively toward his pocket. The Bimm's gaze followed it. Boba fingered the card in his pocket, but did not take it out.

## STAR WARS: Maze of Deception

He didn't have to. Nuri had already guessed what it was. He looked up at Boba. A smile filled the alien's broad face.

"Ah! I see!" said Nuri. "You have a filocard. You have come here to convert currency—or to get currency that you have stored in one of the banks here. May I see your card?"

Boba shook his head. His fingers tightened around the card in his pocket. He felt sweat beading on his forehead. What was the alien *really* after?

He glared at Nuri. He was still bigger than the alien. Stronger, too.

But then Boba remembered where he was: in a strange tunnel, on a strange planet. Even if he did escape from the Bimm, where would he go?

As though reading his mind, Nuri raised his hands. His expression was mild. "You misunderstand, young sir! I am no thief! I am here to provide a service, that is all. I can help you get your credits!"

The Bimm looked pointedly at Boba's pocket. A shining corner of the card stuck out. It glinted in the dim room.

"That is what I do," Nuri continued. "I help visitors. For a fee, of course."

Boba hesitated. If the alien tried to steal his card, Boba could knock him down. He could force the alien to do what *he* wanted.

Isn't that what bounty hunters did? Capture people?

Yet Nuri did not look dangerous. He looked friendly. He looked like he really did want to help Boba. *To*—how had the Bimm put it?—*to provide a service*.

Could Boba trust him?

Boba remembered the dream he had about his father. *The Dream*.

*"Trust no one, but use everyone."*

Boba looked at the Bimm's bright, friendly eyes. Slowly he pulled the card from his pocket and nodded.

"Okay," he said. He held the card out. His own eyes were hard. "But remember—I'm a bounty hunter. Just like Aurra Sing.

**Elizabeth Hand**

You wouldn't make her angry, right? Well, you don't want to even *think* about double-crossing me."

## CHAPTER TEN

The Bimm stared at Boba. Then he bowed respectfully. “Of course, young sir. I am here to help you—for the fee I mentioned earlier.”

Nuri took the card from Boba. The alien’s fingers felt soft, furry, and very, very warm. Boba frowned slightly. “How much is the fee?”

Nuri held the card up to the soft yellow light of the passage. He examined it carefully. “That depends,” he said.

Boba moved closer to him. He tried to figure out what the alien could see in the card. “Depends on what?”

“On how much this is worth.” Nuri held up the card. “I can arrange for you to procure your currency, without, er, complications.”

The alien glanced meaningfully at the door leading back out onto Level Two. Boba knew that by “complications,” he meant Aura Sing.

Boba asked, “How can you do that?”

Nuri shrugged. “By avoiding attention. As I am sure you have noticed, there are many rules on Aargau.”

Boba nodded. “I saw that,” he agreed.

“Well, some of us—many of us—have made our own rules. Now, I have shown trust in you, young sir, by telling you my

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name. But before I check this—” Nuri held up the shining card “—I must be able to trust *you*. I must know you are not dangerous, or a wanted man. I must know *your* name.”

Boba nodded slowly, thinking.

He had to admit it. He liked the idea that someone thought him dangerous. It made him feel powerful. It made him feel that he had a secret.

Which, of course, he did. He knew that Count Tyranus and Count Dooku were the same person. That was a dangerous secret—but it gave him power.

And he was the only one who knew.

Also, of course, he *was* wanted—wanted by Aurra Sing!

Boba looked at Nuri. The Bimm still held his card up, waiting.

“My name,” said Boba proudly, “is Boba Fett.”

The Bimm stared at him. After a moment he bowed. “Boba, sir,” he said. “I am proud to meet you.”

Boba bowed back, a little awkwardly. “And you—Nuri.”

The Bimm straightened again. Suddenly he was all business.

“Now,” Nuri said. He opened his pale yellow vest. Under it he wore a thick leather belt. On the belt was a small rectangular object: a computer of some sort.

Nuri fiddled with the computer, and it blinked to life. He held up the card, then inserted it into the top of the computer. The computer beeped and blinked. A small silvery screen lit up. There were numbers and letters on it which Boba could not understand.

*Must be in Bimmsaarii*, he thought.

Nuri peered down at the screen, reading it. His furry eyebrows raised in surprise. He looked up at Boba and said, “Well! You are quite a fortunate young bounty hunter, Boba, sir! You are worth a great deal.”

Boba nodded. “I know.”

“It says that this fortune was acquired for you by someone named Jango Fett,” the Bimm went on. “Your father?”

“Yes,” said Boba.

## STAR WARS: Maze of Deception

“Is he with you, then? He is the only other person allowed access to this treasure.”

Boba shook his head. “N-no,” he said. He could not keep the sorrow from creeping into his voice. “He’s—he’s not with me.”

The Bimm looked up at him. His eyes were sympathetic and understanding. “I see,” he said. He seemed to think for a minute, staring first at the card, then at Boba.

At last Nuri said, “This Aurra Sing. She is not someone I would want pursuing me. She has killed many people. Many powerful people. Here on Aargau, we are neutral. But we are not stupid. And we are not without sympathy for those in need.”

He smiled at Boba, then held out the card for him to take. “Here, Boba, sir. I will help you retrieve your treasure. There will be a fee for my services, but you do not have to pay me in advance. I will deduct it from your card.”

Boba looked at him. “Thank you,” he said. He took the card and put it back into his pocket. “Could you tell which bank has the treasure in it?”

“No.” Nuri rubbed his chin. “To get that information, you would have to go back to Level One, to the security desk.”

Boba’s heart sank. He looked at the door that led onto Level Two.

Somewhere out there, Aurra Sing was looking for him.

And, knowing Aurra Sing, she would find a way of obtaining a weapon—whether it was allowed or not.

Boba turned to Nuri. “Isn’t there any other way?” he asked. “Besides going back up there?”

The little alien smiled. He put a reassuring hand on Boba’s arm. “Boba, sir, I have told you that here on Aargau, some of us have made our own rules. Well, we have made our own place, too. A place where the other rules don’t apply—and our rules do.”

He turned and gestured toward the dim passage behind them. “I will take you to this place now, if you wish.”

## **Elizabeth Hand**

Boba looked at the Bimm, and then at the passage. He felt his neck begin to prickle with fear and excitement. “What is this place called?” he asked.

Nuri gazed down the passage and smiled—a strange, knowing smile.

“It is called,” he said, “the Undercity.”



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

“The Undercity?” Boba echoed Nuri’s words. “But—”

He stopped, remembering what he had been told on Level One.

*You can find some very shady characters in the Undercity, the attendant had warned him. It is terribly dangerous, especially with the recent skirmishes against the Separatists.*

And now Nuri wanted to take him there!

Just the thought scared Boba. But then he remembered what his father used to say—

*Fear is energy, Jango had taught him. And you can learn to control it. If you concentrate, you can change your energy, from fear to excitement. Then you can use that energy, instead of being used by it.*

Boba concentrated now. He closed his eyes. He could feel his heart pounding. He could feel his own fear.

He took a deep breath. He held it while he counted to three, then exhaled slowly.

*This is energy, he thought. And I can control it.*

Breathe. Exhale.

Already he could feel his heart slowing down. Growing more calm. More in control.

Not afraid, but excited.

## Elizabeth Hand

“Okay!” he said. He opened his eyes and saw Nuri a few feet ahead of him. “I’m ready! What are we waiting for?”

Nuri smiled. “This way,” he said, and pointed down the passage.

Boba followed him. The passage twisted and turned. Tubes of glowing yellow lit their way. Now and then he saw small holosigns, covered with symbols he did not recognize. The images shifted and changed, from red to green to blue to purple. They made his eyes hurt to look at them. After a while he concentrated on staring at Nuri’s back and nothing else.

After about five minutes the Bimm stopped. Set into the ground in front of him was a heavy, round, metal door. Nuri stooped and, with an effort, yanked the door open. He straightened, catching his breath, and stared at Boba.

“In a moment we will begin our descent to the lowest level of Aargau,” Nuri said. “The actual surface of the planet. It is the remains of a vast city. It was built by the original natives of Aargau millions of years ago. The pyramid has grown out of it, layer by layer, level by level, over thousands of years. Aargau is a highly civilized planet now. As I told you, it has many rules. But it was not always so.”

Here Nuri’s expression grew serious. “In the Undercity, individuals are not as well-behaved as they are up here. It is dangerous to visit there. Sometimes fatal.”

Boba swallowed. He tried to look brave—although he certainly didn’t *feel* brave.

But that was okay. He felt excited. He was doing something he had never done before! And he was doing it on his own.

Well, almost. He looked at Nuri and smiled. “I can handle it,” he said.

Nuri cocked his head. “You are not frightened?”

Boba shrugged. “Yeah. I am. But I haven’t changed my mind. I still want to go.”

## STAR WARS: Maze of Deception

Nuri looked pleased. “That is good. To admit fear is a good thing. It makes one careful. And carelessness has killed more visitors to the Undercity than anything else.”

Nuri rubbed his chin, regarding Boba thoughtfully.

“And besides,” said the little Bimm. His smile grew even wider. “A visit to the Undercity is an important part of any bounty hunter’s education!”

That made Boba feel good. He grinned back.

“Well then—” Nuri gestured at the opening in the floor in front of him. Boba took a deep breath, then stepped alongside him.

“I’m ready,” he said, and looked down.

“Ready for anything?” asked Nuri.

Boba nodded. “Ready for anything!”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

As Boba looked down, he saw what had been hidden behind the round door in the floor. A capsule, big enough to hold two people. It had clear sides, so you could see out of it. It had a control panel but no steering mechanism. It reminded him of the cloud car he had flown in Cloud City, only smaller, and with no way to change direction.

“What’s that?” he asked.

Nuri bent to press a button on the capsule’s side. Its top hatch opened. “Hop in and find out,” he said.

Nuri climbed into the front. Boba slipped in behind him. The top closed again. Boba looked around and saw that the capsule was inside yet another tunnel—like a sort of tube, or slide, that curved and swirled and twisted ever downward.

“Is this how you get to the Undercity?” he asked.

Nuri nodded. “It is one of the ways. There are thousands. Many are only known to a handful of people. Many have been hidden for so long that they’ve been forgotten. Of course, there are *official* routes to the Undercity—turbolifts and such—but one needs special clearances for those. And money.”

With no warning Nuri flicked a switch on the control board and the capsule plummeted downward with a sudden *whoosh*.

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“Whoa!” Boba shouted. It was as though the entire floor had dropped away beneath them. The capsule shot almost straight down, then curved abruptly to the right. It corkscrewed around and around—like going down a gigantic, kilometers-long slide. Boba braced himself with his hands and looked out.

Everywhere he saw lights. Shimmering, blazing flashes of red and orange and blue and violet.

“Those are the other levels,” Nuri explained. He had to shout to be heard over the rush and roar of their descent. “We are traveling at a rate of kilometers per minute—but in realtime, not in hyperspace.”

“Cool!” said Boba. He wished this thing had controls!

He stared out again. He had glimpses of huge leaping flames, of tunnels that seemed to be filled with molten gold. One level was like a giant aquarium, where huge dianogas floated, their tentacles waving.

Boba wrinkled his nose. “Smells bad here,” he said.

“Sanitation level,” said Nuri. “We’re almost there.”

Suddenly everything went black. Not the kind of black you see at night when you go to sleep. Not the kind of black inside a closet, or a darkened ship. Not like the darkness of space, which was not darkness at all, but spangled with stars and planets and distant galaxies.

This was darkness like Boba had never seen. Like he had never imagined. It was like a huge, smothering hand pressed upon his face. Boba couldn’t see Nuri in front of him. He couldn’t see his own hand. For a heart-sickening second Boba imagined that he himself had disappeared. That he had somehow been transformed into antimatter. That he was—

“Here!” exclaimed Nuri.

An explosion of light surrounded them. Purple, green, deep blue. Boba blinked. The light flickered. It was not an explosion now, but flashes of color. Shapes. Buildings. Moving waves that were people. The familiar figures of droids, creatures, men, and

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women. Above them all was that terrible, strange darkness. It was like a cloud or a huge black curtain.

The capsule began to slow down. Boba let his breath out in relief. "That was great," he said. "Kind of creepy at the end, though."

Nuri nodded. "That was the emptiness between the Undercity and the upper levels. Sunlight never comes here. Only artificial light. And darkness."

Boba shivered. The capsule came to a halt. He gazed out at a teeming city. It was more crowded than anyplace he had ever seen. A disorderly mass of living things, more like a hive than anything else.

The capsule lid popped open. Nuri jumped out. He bowed to Boba.

"Welcome to the Undercity," he said.

Boba had thought that Level Two was crowded. He had thought that Coruscant was crowded, and the *Candaserri*, too.

None of these compared to the Undercity. There were so many people, so many beings, so many droids, so many *everything*, that his head whirled.

"Stay with me!" said Nuri. "If you get lost, you'll never find your way out."

Boba scowled. "Don't bet on that," he said. "I've got a good sense of direction."

"That might not be enough to help you here," replied Nuri.

Boba hated to admit it, but he had to agree with the Bimm. High above them, the sky that was not a sky was crisscrossed with thousands of shining objects. They looked like ribbons, or rainbows. But they were actually other chutes, or slides, like the one Boba had taken down here. He could see capsules speeding through them, up and down. The air was filled with bright airspeeders, swoop bikes, robo-hacks, even Podracers. On the ground, streets and sidewalks wound around tall, crumbling buildings. The streets were filled with rubbish, broken stones, mangled airspeeders.

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And everywhere he looked, he saw people—nonhumans, mostly, but a lot of humans, too. None of them looked friendly. A lot of them looked dangerous.

“Hey, watch it!” someone snapped at Boba. A tall, angry-looking Caridian glared down at him.

“Sorry,” said Boba. The Caridian jostled past him. Boba looked around: Nuri was gone!

*Ugh.* Boba swallowed. A group of swaggering space pirates went by him, laughing. Boba stared back at them, trying to look unimpressed.

“Young sir!” Nuri’s voice carried from a few meters away. “This way!”

Boba hurried to join him. Past shops and markets, through abandoned structures that looked like ancient starships, under a vast broken glass dome. They passed food vendors, too. Some of what they were selling looked disgusting—things with claws and tentacles and too many eyes. But some of the food looked and smelled delicious. It made Boba’s mouth water. He couldn’t remember how long it had been since he had eaten. He was pretty sure it hadn’t been today.

At first he tried to keep track of the way they were going. But after a while, Boba gave up trying to keep track. Their path wound in and out, back and forth. Once he was certain they were backtracking. He wondered if for some reason Nuri was trying to fool him. Keep him from being able to find his way back on his own.

And no matter where they went, there were crowds. Despite the rule against nonnatives being armed, most of those he saw carried weapons of one sort or another. Vibroblades, stun batons, blasters, wrist rockets. Boba was pretty sure most of them *weren’t* citizens of Aargau.

And he was pretty sure he would not want to bump into *any* of them, alone and unarmed.

“Where do all these people come from?” Boba asked.

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Nuri led him down the street, toward an alley. “They come from all over the galaxy,” he said in his high, singsong voice. “They are drawn by the fortunes to be made on Aargau, trading currency. And here in the Undercity, anything goes. Betrayal. Murder. The black market is busy here. Smugglers trade and sell gold, credits, data, droids, jewels, weapons, ships. But the single most valuable thing is *information*.”

“Information?” Boba frowned. “That doesn’t seem very interesting.” *Not compared to weapons, or ships*, he thought.

“Trust me,” said Nuri. “I know what I’m talking about. And stay near me—it’s risky just coming down here. Especially for a first-timer.”

*I trust nobody*, Boba thought angrily. At that instant, a figure rushed from the dark alley.

“Get back!” commanded Nuri.

“No!” said Boba. He reached for a broken brick to throw at the figure. It had nearly reached them, its arms outstretched. It was too dark to make it out clearly—

But not too dark to see that it was holding a blaster. And the blaster was pointed right at Boba Fett.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Boba swung his arm back, ready to hurl the brick. But before he could, Nuri stopped him.

“Stop!” the Bimm said. “Wait—”

The figure drew up beside them and halted, panting. It was a fur-covered Bothan, her pointy ears pressed back against her head in fear. “Nuri!” she exclaimed.

Nuri stared up at her in concern. “What is it, Hev’sin?” he asked.

“I have been searching for you!” She turned and looked at Boba. Her blaster was still pointed at him.

“Who is he?” she asked Nuri in a low, accusing voice.

Boba stared at his feet. Nuri glanced at him, then shook his head. “Only a boy,” he said to the Bothan quietly. “You will not need your weapon with him. Tell me, Hev’sin—what is wrong?”

The Bothan hesitated. Then she slipped her blaster back into her belt. She stepped next to Nuri, and the two of them turned away slightly. It was obvious they were not worried about Boba overhearing them.

*After all, Boba thought, I’m only a boy. Not a serious threat.*

*Or so you think.*

Boba knew about Bothans. They were the greatest spies in the galaxy. They left their homeworld, Bothawai, and traveled

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everywhere. And everywhere they went, they found work—at undercover jobs, as independent operatives, or part of the Bothan Spynet.

And what was it Nuri had just said?

*The single most valuable thing is information.*

Boba pretended to stare at the alley nearby. But in fact he was listening to what the Bothan was saying.

Boba was spying.

*Two can play this game, he thought. And maybe only one can win—but that one will be me.*

He could hear Hev'sin talking, in a low, urgent voice. "They say he has come here to raise currency for the Separatists. That is why he is down in the Undercity. He is pretending to make a standard visit to the Banking Clan offices on Level Four, but his real business is down here. He doesn't want to draw the attention of members of the Republic."

"Are you sure of this, Hev'sin?" asked Nuri. He looked extremely interested, but not too alarmed.

"Positive," hissed the Bothan. "I saw him with my own eyes. He is surrounded by clone troopers—he never travels anywhere without a full guard now. Besides, I would know San Hill anywhere."

*San Hill!* Boba remembered—he had seen San Hill just a little while ago, up on Level Two—the man who was skinny and ugly as a stick insect. The Head of the InterGalactic Banking Clan.

*San Hill* was a Separatist. Boba learned this when he was on Geonosis, and he had seen San Hill meeting with Count Dooku. Boba wondered if San Hill knew that Dooku was the same person as Tyranus—Tyranus, who had created the clone troopers that were now attacking San Hill's allies!

*I'll bet he doesn't know,* thought Boba.

And then he had another thought.

*Maybe he'd like to know...for a price.*

Information was very valuable here on Aargau.

"Where did you see him?" Nuri was asking Bothan.

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“Near the Hutts’ gambling palace. You can be certain San Hill is up to no good, if he is doing business with the Hutts.”

Nuri nodded. “That is so.”

Boba’s eyes widened. *The Hutts!* He knew who they were—one of the most notorious clans in the galaxy! They ran smuggling and gambling houses all through Hutt Space, and beyond. Now it seemed that they had some sort of operation here on Aargau. An illegal one, too, since it was in the Undercity.

Boba’s father, Jango, had done business with Jabba, the Hutt clan’s ruler.

“The Hutts value a good bounty hunter,” Jango had told his son. “They pay well, too—better than almost anyone.”

*For knowledge you must find Jabba*, his father’s book had said. Could Jabba the Hutt be here on Aargau?

Boba glanced over at Nuri and the Bothan, then quickly turned his head again.

“I must go now.” The Bothan looked over her shoulder. She stared right past Boba. It was as though he was invisible to her. Another advantage of being young! “I knew you would want to know this, Nuri.”

The Bimm nodded. “Yes. Thank you.”

He handed her a coin. The Bothan looked at it, disappointed. For a moment Boba thought she was going to argue—but then Boba remembered.

Bimms were expert hagglers.

And this Bothan didn’t have time to waste on haggling. She gave Nuri a farewell that was more of a snarl, then turned and walked quickly away.

“Interesting,” Nuri said, more to himself than Boba. “Most interesting.”

He looked up, and it was as though he saw Boba for the first time. A small smile crossed the Bimm’s face.

“Well, my young visitor,” said Nuri. He gestured to the alley behind him. “Shall we go and get your money?”

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Boba said nothing. He didn't move. Something about the Bimm seemed different. Maybe it was that smile. Maybe it was just that Boba was tired and hungry. He waited, and finally nodded.

"Okay," he said.

He followed Nuri into the alley. It was dim, but not too dark. It curved slightly, though, so Boba couldn't quite see what was ahead of him. A few more space pirates passed them, laughing loudly. Boba tried to stand as tall as he could when they walked by him. He'd give anything to be back on *Slave I*! He'd give anything to be off this planet, and on his own....

"Here we are," said Nuri suddenly. He stopped in front of a metal door. There was a small window in the door, with bars in it. At the bottom was a narrow opening. Behind the barred window stood a very old, worn-out Admin droid.

"Can I help you?" it asked in a grating voice.

Nuri turned to Boba. "May I have your card, please?"

Boba thought for a moment. If the Bimm had meant to rob him, he could have done it before now. After a moment he shrugged. He pulled the card from his pocket and handed it to Nuri. The Bimm would still need Boba's DNA to get the credits.

Or would he?

"I'd like to have my fee deducted from this young man's account," said Nuri. He slid the card through the opening in the barred window. "Six hundred thousand mesarcs should do it."

The droid picked up the card. "As you wish," it said. It swiped the card across a shining red screen.

Boba watched the droid suspiciously. It hadn't bothered to question Boba at all. It hadn't even looked at him. And suddenly the words of the security attendant on Level One came back to him.

*You must also be sure not to exchange your money from anyone who is not a licensed member of the Banking Clan. There are black-market money changers on Aargau.*

This was an illegal banking machine.

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“Hey!” yelled Boba. “What are you doing? That’s *my* money!”

He lunged for the banking machine, jamming his hand through the narrow opening, reaching for the card and hitting at buttons to stop the transaction. He managed to halt things—but it was already too late.

“Five hundred thousand mesarcs have been taken from your account,” the droid said in its rusty voice. It dropped the card back into the opening. “Have a nice day.”

Boba grabbed the card. He turned furiously to Nuri.

“You!” Boba began to shout. But then he stopped.

Nuri was morphing. His face went from yellow fur to silver to green. He grew taller, his arms grew longer, until he towered above Boba.

He wasn’t a Bimm at all.

“You’re a shapeshifter!” gasped Boba.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“You’re a clever young man,” the Clawdite shapeshifter said. It was a *young* shapeshifter, with a menacing, oozing voice. Its body seemed to melt and re-form before Boba’s eyes. Its body took on muscle, sinew, strength. Its head grew dark thick hair. Its eyes grew dark as well.

“But not quite clever enough,” it said.

Boba stared at it in amazement. “But—”

“Consider yourself lucky, young sir,” said the shapeshifter that had been Nuri. “I could have taken your precious card and kept it all for myself. I could have killed you.”

The shapeshifter smiled—the same unpleasant smile Boba had last seen on the Bimm’s face.

“But I admire your courage,” the Clawdite went on. “You’re young and learning, just like me. And I hate Aurra Sing. She is my rival. It seems you and I have that in common. I could have left you up on Level Two. She would have found you there, very soon. But finding you would have pleased Aurra Sing. I hate her far too much for that.”

Boba stared furiously at the Clawdite. “You have no right to claim what’s mine!”

The Clawdite laughed. “Well, you did take the card out before I could get everything. If you can somehow find your way back

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to the Upper Levels, you will find there is enough money left for you to buy a way to get off-planet. But only if you are clever enough, Boba. You will have to avoid being found by Aurra Sing. You will have to find a way to the Upper Levels. And then you will have to find your way to what's left of your inheritance."

The Clawdite tilted his head. "I said that the Undercity is part of any bounty hunter's education. I know it's a big part of mine. I hope you have enjoyed your lesson, Boba."

And with a mocking bow, the Clawdite turned and hurried down the alley.

Boba stared after him. *How could I have been so careless?* he thought angrily. *I forgot the number one rule of bounty hunters—*

*Trust no one.*

The Bimm—no, the *Clawdite*—had betrayed him. Still, the shapeshifter was right. Boba had learned an important lesson. Next time he wouldn't be so quick to accept help.

If there *was* a next time.

But what to do now? Boba turned and looked at the droid behind its barred window. Hmmm. Nuri had been able to get money from Boba's account. Why not Boba himself? He walked over to the window.

"I'd like to get the rest of my money," he said. He slipped the card through the opening.

The droid looked at him with its unblinking eyes. It took the card and slid it into a slot in its arm. "Sorry," it said. "You do not have permission to use this terminal."

It slipped the card back to Boba. Clearly, the Clawdite had known an access code that Boba couldn't even guess at.

"What?" Boba said angrily. "You mean—"

"Sorry," said the droid. "Shall I call security to assist you?"

"No," Boba said hastily. He began to walk away.

Then he stopped. Before, when the Clawdite had given Boba's card to the droid, the robot had said something—something about a bank.

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Boba still had the card. If he knew exactly where his money was, he could get it himself—without Aurra Sing!

He went quickly back to the window. “What bank did you say that money was in?”

The droid tilted its shining chromium head. “InterGalacticBank of Kuat. Level Two. Shall I call security to assist you?”

“No!” Boba said quickly. “I mean, no thanks!”

Nuri had been right—information *was* valuable!

But he had no time to celebrate his good luck. Behind him came the sound of footsteps and more harsh laughter. Boba looked back and saw several tall, heavily armed figures. More pirates, no doubt.

*Time to get out of here!* He turned and ran soundlessly down the alley.

It ended on another street. This was one was even busier and more crowded than those he’d been on earlier, with Nuri. Boba stood for a minute, catching his breath. He felt no fear whatsoever. He felt anger, and excitement, and determination. He wasn’t too worried about Aurra Sing down here. What were the odds of her finding him in all this chaos?

Still, where should he go?

He looked up and down the street. As far as he could see in every direction, there were shops. Some were brightly lit and filled with bustling service droids and well-dressed humanoids and aliens. Others were dim, with only one or two grim figures standing guard by the entrance. Some were in buildings that were little more than piles of rubble. All seemed to be gambling dens of some sort. Many had signs that blinked or scrolled messages in brilliant green or gold or silver letters.

ALL CURRENCIES CHANGED HERE  
ALL COIN ACCEPTED  
NO SUM TOO SMALL!



## STAR WARS: Maze of Deception

Boba began to walk. Excited, noisy crowds spilled from doorways into the street around him. Robo-hacks—airborne taxis—hovered in front of gambling houses, waiting to take new customers away to spend the riches they had just won. Evil-looking figures lurked in alleyways, waiting to pounce on unsuspecting passersby. High above, the air was crisscrossed with glowing tubes. Shining capsules sped up and down between the Undercity and the Upper Levels. In between, swoop bikes and airspeeders flashed.

*That's what I'm going to get!* Boba thought as he watched a swoop bike whoosh by. Once he figured out how to get his money, maybe he could hire one to take him back to *Slave I*—although flying one himself would be better!

“Pagh! Human scum! Out of my way!” a voice snarled.

Boba looked up, startled. A figure blocked the street before him. It was tall, with orange eyes in a pale fungoid-looking face, and a long trunklike appendage wrapped around its throat. A Twi'lek.

“Didn't you hear me?” the Twi'lek repeated fiercely. Its hand moved threateningly beneath its robes.

“Sorry,” Boba said hastily. He stepped aside. The Twi'lek gave him a sneering look, then pushed him aside and strode past him. Boba watched him go, thinking.

“Wait a minute,” he said softly to himself.

He had an idea!

His father had told him once about a Twi'lek named Bib Fortuna. The grub-faced alien had served as Jabba the Hutt's right hand, helping run his gambling operations on Tatooine and other places across the galaxy. Here on Aargau there was a Hutt gambling palace. Was there a chance that *this* Twi'lek was the one his father meant?

Boba stared after the retreating figure. If it *was* Bib Fortuna, he might be heading toward the Hutt's den.

Boba knew the odds were against it—but then, everyone in the Undercity seemed willing to gamble. He'd take a chance.

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Boba began to hurry after the Twi'lek. He was careful to stay out of sight and to always keep him in his view. Sometimes this was hard, as the alien ducked in and out of narrow alleys and tunnels. Still, Boba followed him tirelessly through the maze that was the Undercity.

*Check this out*, Boba thought with a grin. He was stalking his prey through incredibly dangerous terrain—just like a bounty hunter!

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Twi'lek had reached the end of a long, narrow winding street. He halted in front of a large building with a rounded roof that had spikes on it. The building was shaped like the head of a gigantic krayt dragon. The dragon's open mouth was the door. Inside, Boba could see a bustling throng of aliens, humans, and droids. Between the krayt dragon's teeth, a shimmering holosign flashed green-and-gold Hutttese letters.

The Twi'lek walked up to the sign. Without hesitating, it went inside.

Boba watched him go. His heart was beating hard now. He had seen a lot of people, a lot of aliens, and a lot of droids since he'd been in the Undercity. But there was one thing he *hadn't* seen.

He hadn't seen a single kid. He hadn't seen a single person his own age.

The last thing he wanted to do was draw attention to himself. Silence and stealth were a bounty hunter's greatest weapons.

But there was no way he could sneak through that krayt's mouth and into the gambling palace unnoticed. A bunch of burly guards stood just inside the entrance—Gamorrean boars, by the look of them. Boba watched as the Twi'lek strode right past them. They bowed to him slightly, but otherwise paid him no

## Elizabeth Hand

notice. Yet when two Wookiees approached moments later, the Gamorrean guards frisked them before waving them inside.

How could Boba get past them?

Boba glanced behind him, down the winding street. He could see two more groups of people heading toward the Hutts' gambling palace. If he remained where he was, he'd be seen. At best he'd be told to leave. At worst—

He couldn't afford to think of that now. A few yards away, a pile of rubble loomed. Quickly, before the approaching groups could see him, Boba ran and ducked beside it.

The first group grew nearer. Boba could see them clearly now: half a dozen small Jawa scavengers. All wore the Jawas' distinctive hooded robes. All spoke to one another in the Jawas' usual babble. As they passed, their eyes glowed from within their hoods like tiny torches.

"Hey," whispered Boba to himself.

He had another idea—a good one.

He turned and quickly began searching through the rubble. Bricks, broken glass, shreds of leather. A melted ruin that had once been a blaster. Broken spear-points. Exploded grenades. Something that looked alarmingly like a human hand.

The Hutts' gambling palace was a popular place. But it probably wasn't a good idea to stick around it too long.

Suddenly, Boba found what he was looking for. He bit his lip to keep from crying aloud in triumph. It was only a rag—a long, grayish-yellow piece of cloth, dirty and full of holes.

But it was good enough for him. Boba glanced back to make sure no one had sighted him. The Jawas were just approaching the entrance now. One of them appeared to be talking to the Gammorean guards. Swiftly, Boba pulled the cloth over his head. It smelled bad—it stank, as a matter of fact—but he gritted his teeth and tried to arrange it properly.

He pulled part of it over his face. He tugged it forward, till it covered his face like a hood. The cloth fell to just below his knees. He removed his belt from his tunic and tied it loosely

## STAR WARS: Maze of Deception

around his waist. That was better. He was a little taller than the Jawas, so he bent his knees. It was hard to walk that way, but once he was inside, maybe no one would notice if he straightened up.

He peered around the pile of rubble. Another group was nearing the gambling palace. They were too far away for him to see clearly, but they were tall, and vaguely humanoid.

And there were a lot of them.

*I'd better get inside, fast.*

Boba looked down at the gambling palace. The Gammorean guards were nodding and waving the Jawas inside. Boba waited until the last Jawa had disappeared into the krayt dragon's mouth. Then he took a deep breath, and began to hurry toward the entrance.

But when he got there he stopped. One of the Gammorean guards glared down at him, grunting in a questioning tone. It held a tall spear, and waved it menacingly.

Its partner peered through its piggy little eyes at Boba, skeptical.

Boba bent his knees a little more. He tugged the folds of cloth around his head, praying his face didn't show. He pointed toward the entrance, miming that he wanted to go inside.

Just then, one guard nudged the other, grunting and pointing behind Boba.

"Aarrgh!" snarled the other guard. It gnashed its tusks angrily and stared where the other had indicated.

Boba wanted to turn and look behind him—but he didn't dare. He stood, wondering if he should make a dash for the entrance.

Without warning, one of the Gammoreans swung his spear through the air high above Boba's head. He gestured Boba inside.

Boba nodded eagerly. Gathering the folds of his cloak, he ducked his head, then walked as fast as he could through the krayt dragon's mouth—and into the domain of the Hutts.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Inside the gambling palace, the noise was deafening. Laughter, angry shouts, howls of triumph and disappointment—all mingled with the jingle of coins, the rattle of dice, the clack of Kenoballs, the cries of card dealers and money changers. The Hutts' gambling palace was yet another maze, all smoke-filled rooms and arcades, so crowded with gamblers that Boba could hardly squeeze through. Gamorrean boars lumbered around, keeping order and throwing out the most unruly customers. Boba saw the Jawas he'd seen outside, haggling with a Bimm over a game of Outlander. Boba wondered if it was a real Bimm or another shapeshifter.

"Watch the Podraces!" a voice shouted. Boba looked up and saw a huge screen. Podraces were being broadcast from Tatooine. "No bets refused!"

Boba fingered the card in his pocket. He was too smart to waste his money on betting. His father had warned him against gambling.

"A bounty hunter gambles with his life every day," Jango always said. "Only a fool would gamble with money, too."

Boba tugged his ragged hood closer around his face. He had only one aim now—to find some way back to the Upper Levels.

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To find some way of locating his treasure. To get back to *Slave I* and leave Aargau—without Aurra Sing.

He put his hand in his pocket and touched the book his father had left him.

*For knowledge you must find Jabba.*

*Find Jabba.* Boba had always assumed that to locate the notorious gangster, he would have to go to Jabba's homeworld of Nal Hutta. Or to Tatooine, where the powerful clan leader had created a smuggling empire.

But what if Jabba were here, on Aargau? The Hutts were involved in every kind of illegal activity in the galaxy. Maybe Jabba was actually here, in the Undercity—in this very gambling palace!

But how to find him? Boba thought hard. He'd have to find the Twi'lek again—the one he thought might be the famous Bib Fortuna. He pulled the ragged cloak back a little from his eyes, straining to see through the dim, smoky room.

A deep voice snarled behind him. Boba looked up and saw one of the Gamorrean boars. A spear was raised threateningly in his huge hand. The message was clear. *If you're not spending money, get out of here!*

Boba nodded apologetically. He started to turn away, when the guard suddenly grabbed his shoulder.

*Uhp!* If the guard pulled off his disguise, there'd be no Boba, either! Quickly he dug into his pocket and held up his card, careful to hold it in his sleeve, so his hand wouldn't show. It flickered gold in the dim light.

The Gamorrean's ugly pig face grew even uglier with disappointment. With a grunt the guard turned away and began to hassle someone else.

*Whew,* thought Boba. *That was close. Got to be more careful!*

He began edging through the crowd, looking for the Twi'lek. Once he thought he saw him, but it turned out to be a tall alien wearing a fur coat. Once he thought he heard a Wookiee's deep,

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hooting voice. But it turned out to be a small armored droid, rolling through the crowd.

Boba watched it curiously. Then he looked around. There were a *lot* of droids here—more than he would have expected.

Why were they here?

As he looked around, he noticed that these weren't protocol droids, or service droids. They weren't servomechs, either.

They were sentry droids. And security droids, and powerful police droids. Boba felt the skin on his neck prickle. He glanced up, and saw a guard droid hovering on the other side of the room. It turned slowly in the air, its sensors scanning the den. Its three weaponry arms were poised to fire if necessary.

"What's going on?" Boba whispered. Whatever it was, he didn't like it or trust it—one bit.

As if in answer to his thoughts, two tall women in pilot uniforms passed him. They were talking in low voices. Boba pulled his ragged cloak around his face and turned away. But he was listening.

"Rumor is that Dooku sent him," one of the pilots said quietly. "Raising more funds."

"There aren't enough credits in the galaxy to overthrow the Republic," the other woman retorted. "Dooku is mad."

"I assure you, that is the one thing he is not," countered her friend. "And there may not be enough money in the galaxy to fund a rebellion—but there certainly is enough in the Hutts' pockets!"

The women pilots laughed softly. They walked around a corner, out of Boba's earshot.

Count Dooku! Could the sinister Count be here as well?

No—the pilot had said, *Dooku sent him*.

Who would the Count have sent?

Boba thought fast. And he remembered.

San Hill. The head of the InterGalactic Banking Clan, and one of the most powerful figures in the galaxy. But just a little while



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ago the Bothan spy had told Nuri that San Hill was here, in the Undercity—

San Hill was raising funds for the Separatists. Raising money for Count Dooku. And at the same time, the clone troopers were here as a security force of the Republic—clone troopers who had been bred at the command of Tyranus.

The two sides were set to oppose each other, Republic and Separatists. Clones and droids. But behind each side was the same person: the man Boba knew as the Count.

Count Tyranus.

Count Dooku.

It was all part of some terrible plot, Boba was sure of that. He was also sure that, if his father were still alive, he would find a way to make use of this information—especially with San Hill on the same planet.

Boba could make use of it, too. He just had to figure out how. Maybe the pilots would have more information. He turned and began to move stealthily after them, across the crowded floor.

But when Boba turned the corner, the pilots were gone. Instead, he found himself face-to-face with three tall, vicious figures. Armorlike scales covered their bodies, and their broad, lipless mouths were full of sharp teeth. Long tails protruded from beneath their tunics, lashing the air threateningly as they argued and laughed in deep, throaty voices.

Reptilian Barabels!

“Care to join us?” one hissed at Boba. They were in the middle of a game of three-handed solitaire. “The stakes are high, Jawa—your money, or your life!”

The Barabel jabbed at him with one long, pointed claw, and the others laughed.

Boba shook his head. He began to back away. But before he could, fast as lightning, the Barabel’s clawed hand grabbed him by the shoulder. Boba ducked, kicking out at the Barabel’s ankle. The tall reptile gave a shout of rage and pain. He snatched his hand back, his claws closing tightly around Boba’s ragged cloak.

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Boba dove for the floor. The cloak hung from the Barabel's claws like a ribbon of gray mist.

"That's no Jawa!" one of the other Barabels hissed.

*That's right*, thought Boba grimly. He rolled across the floor, landed on his stomach, and immediately pulled himself under a table. Above him the Barabels stared at the ragged cloak. They all looked around, nostrils flaring as they peered in vain for Boba.

Meanwhile, Boba hunched back as far as he could into the darkness beneath the table and held his breath. One of the Barabels shook its heavy, lizardlike head. He snorted, snatched the ragged cloak from his friend and tossed it over his shoulder.

"Forget about him! Scavenging scum! Back to the game!"

Once again, the Barabels clustered together, jaws clacking as they looked hungrily over the cards in their hands.

Boba let out a sigh of relief. He was safe.

For the moment...

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

He rested for only a few minutes.

*Now what?* he thought. He no longer had his disguise. If he tried to move, he'd be spotted and thrown out of the gambling palace. Probably his card would be confiscated, too. Then he'd be on his own, with no money and no way out of the Undercity.

And that was the *best* that might happen.

The worst was that he'd be killed. Or captured by slavers.

Boba clenched his jaw grimly. That would never happen. He wouldn't *let* it happen. A good bounty hunter never gets caught.

And he was going to be one of the best.

Still, he needed a plan. *If* he could find the Twi'lek—*if* the Twi'lek really was Bib Fortuna—it might lead him to Jabba the Hutt. *If* Jabba the Hutt was actually here—and *if* the gangster would help him get back up to Level Two.

*That's a lot of ifs*, thought Boba.

He began to crawl toward the other side of the table. From down here, the Hutts' gambling palace was a forest of legs. Boba scanned the room for a pair of legs that belonged to a Twi'lek. He didn't see them—but he saw something else.

On the far side of the room, in a shadowy alcove, a familiar shadowy form stood, arms crossed. The figure was clad in a tight-fitting crimson suit. Its long legs were encased in high

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brown leather boots. A leather weapons vest covered its chest. Its skin glowed dead-white even in the darkness of the gambling den. A long topknot of brilliant red hair cascaded down its back. Blazing blue eyes scanned the room, missing nothing. Seeing everything.

*Aurra Sing.*

Boba's heart raced. He had imagined things couldn't get worse—but they just had. There *was* one thing worse than being captured or killed—and that was being captured or killed by the galaxy's most vengeful bounty hunter. Aurra Sing would show no mercy. She wouldn't care that he was a kid, or Jango Fett's son. To her, he was a double-crosser. Someone who'd cheated her out of her share of the fortune—even if the fortune wasn't rightly hers.

Well, this was no time to *stop* deceiving her. Boba watched as Aurra continued to scan the room. Abruptly, she spun on her heel and began walking—right toward where he crouched beneath the table.

Boba held his breath and froze. He watched as the supple brown boots strode past him—just inches from his nose. A few feet away they came to a stop. He heard the hiss of the Barabels whispering in their own language. Then he heard Aurra's low, powerful voice.

"I'm looking for a boy," she said. "About this tall. Brown hair, brown eyes. Wearing a blue tunic and black boots—though he might be in disguise. I wouldn't put it past him," she added grudgingly.

"We've seen no one," a Barabel hissed. "Now leave us, unless you wish to join our—*ach!*"

Boba edged forward, just enough to peek out. One of Aurra Sing's powerful hands was wrapped tightly around the Barabel's throat. Her other hand held a dagger warningly before her.

"I'm not here to waste my time with filth like you," she spat. "Answer! Have you seen a boy?"

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“Yesssss,” hissed the Barabel. His clawed hand gestured wildly. “Minutes ago—right there—”

Boba sucked his breath in sharply. There was no time to lose. He turned and scrambled toward the back of the table. A wall was there—solid wood. Boba felt around on the floor, searching for a weapon—a stick, a brick, anything he might use to defend himself. His hand closed on something cold and hard. A heavy metal ring, bigger than his hand. He pulled at it as hard as he could. It weighed a ton, but he kept pulling, until at last it moved.

To his shock, the floor moved, too. Boba stared down in astonishment.

The ring was bolted to the floor. It was not a ring, but a handle. When he had tugged at it, he had lifted a panel off the floor.

It was a trapdoor.

“You better not be lying.” Aurra Sing’s harsh voice rang across the room from just meters away. “Otherwise I’ll carve new scales on your ugly faces.”

Boba heard footsteps—Aurra’s feet, heading toward the table. He pulled harder at the ring, trying to pry the entire panel up from the floor. The steps grew closer. The wood squeaked and grated as the panel edged up. The sound seemed deafening to Boba. Now the panel was a few centimeters above the floor. He slid his hands beneath, and with all his strength pushed it up, up, until there was a space large enough for him to squeeze through. He shoved his feet in, kicking wildly at open air.

What if there were no floor? What if the trapdoor opened onto—nothing?

“All right, kid—this is it!” Aurra’s gloating voice echoed from the room directly above him.

Boba took one last deep breath. He forced his legs through the trapdoor, then his chest and his shoulders. He slid down, his hands holding the wood panel above him. Beneath him he felt nothing, just raw empty space, black as the air above the Undercity. For an endless horrible moment he hung there,

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suspended between the floor above and nothing below. Then, with a gasp, he tugged the floor board back into place. It shut without a sound. His fingers slipped from the bare wood. His arms flailed at the air. And without a sound, Boba fell.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

It seemed he fell forever in that close, hot darkness. In reality, it was just seconds.

“*Om.*” With a dull thud, he hit the ground. For a moment he lay there, catching his breath. He stared up. Perhaps three meters above him, he could just make out a black square bounded by four thin, weakly shining lines.

The trapdoor.

Would Aurra notice it? Boba wasn’t going to wait and find out. Very carefully he stood, blinking as his eyes tried to adjust to the darkness. From overhead he could hear the sounds of the Hutts’ den, somewhat muffled now. As his eyes grew accustomed to the dark, he found that he could see a little bit. The faint light from around the trapdoor showed him that he was in a tunnel. It stretched before him and behind him. He turned and peered into the blackness.

Which way should he go?

Above him he heard the scrape of booted feet upon the floor.

Aurra.

Boba chose to go forward—and fast. As quickly and carefully as he dared, he walked, his hands held before him. Now and then he shuddered as something dank and stringy touched his face or hands.

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Cobwebs—at least, he *hoped* they were just cobwebs. Sometimes he thought he heard something skittering underfoot, a dry, rasping sound as of many tiny legs. And after several minutes of feeling his way through the dark, he heard something else as well.

Voices.

They came from somewhere ahead of him. Boba noticed that the tunnel seemed to be growing lighter. Instead of blackness, he was now surrounded by dark gray, like smoke. And now he could see that there were other tunnels branching off from this one. All stretched off into utter blackness. From some of them faint scurrying and chittering sounds echoed.

Boba shivered. If he had taken one of those paths by mistake, he might have wandered down here forever. He didn't want to think about what might live in them. And behind him he heard no footsteps following. There was no sign that Aurra Sing had come after him. He had managed to escape her again.

Maybe his luck was holding out, after all.

The light came from straight ahead, directly in front of him. Boba hurried toward it. He was so intent on getting there that he did not hear the soft clatter of many tiny feet in the tunnel behind him.

Just a few feet before him the passage abruptly ended. A pale square of light glowed on the floor. Boba looked down, and saw a small grille set into the ground at his feet. Through it he could make out dim shapes in a room below him.

"You are certain we are safe here?" a voice asked in the room below.

"Absolutely," a very deep, slow voice responded. It laughed, a horrible, hollow sound. "Hoh, hoh! My uncle himself has seen that this place is secure. No one can get here without our knowledge."

Boba's eyes widened. He was gazing into a secret chamber! The grille must have been put there to aid in spying. Boba slowly lowered himself, until he was kneeling and peering over the very



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edge of the grille. He was careful to stay back, in case someone happened to look up at the ceiling.

"That is good," the first voice said. Boba blinked. After the darkness of the long tunnel, it was hard to get used to the light again. But after a few seconds he could see more clearly.

And what he saw made his breath catch in surprise.

In the room below, a tall, skeletally thin figure sat in a large chair. To either side of him, armed guards stood. They were not clone guards, or droids, either. These were muscular humanoid figures, in drab gray uniforms with blasters slung at their sides. The figure they guarded was San Hill.

"It is in your uncle's interest to support our cause," said the head of the Banking Clan. "Count Dooku has assured me of that."

Boba had to squint to get a good look at the other figure in the room. It was big—huge in fact. A vast, mounded, sluglike body, reclining upon an even vaster chair like a throne. It had tiny, weak-looking arms and a long, fat tail. Layers of fat cascaded beneath its wide, froglike mouth. It was surrounded by guards as well. Boba swallowed nervously.

Was this Jabba the Hutt? If so, he was even more disgusting than his father had described him as being.

The sluglike creature shook its head. "My uncle will make up his own mind," he said in his booming voice. "He will not be hurried, even by Count Dooku."

"Why is your uncle not here?" asked San Hill in a soothing but irritated tone. He looked angry and impatient. "I wish to do business with Jabba himself, not some underling!"

"Gorga is not an underling!" boomed the Hutt. His tiny arms beat against his vast slimy chest. "My uncle is busy tending to our interests on Tatooine. If you desire, you may visit him there. But I would advise against it," Gorga added with a long, rolling laugh.

Boba grimaced. So this was Jabba's nephew! He had a hard time imagining something more repulsive than Gorga. But it seemed like he would have to, until he could see Jabba himself.

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Boba felt a stab of disappointment and nervousness. He had hoped that Jabba would be here, to give him the advice—the knowledge—that his father had said the old crimelord possessed.

But Jabba was not here. He was on Tatooine.

*I have to get to Slave I, Boba thought grimly. I have to get to Tatooine.*

He had wasted enough time here in the Undercity. He had the information he needed about his father's fortune. It was in the Kuat Bank vaults on Level Two. He had his card. *Slave I* was waiting for him, back on Level One. All he had to do was get to the bank, get his credits, and he would have enough to get off of Aargau, and on to Tatooine.

Just the thought of flying again made Boba feel better. He would trace his way back through the tunnel, back to the trapdoor. He'd figure out a way to open it again and climb out. Then he'd figure out how to get back to Level Two. He'd come this far on his own, right?

He could do it.

As silent as a shook, Boba began to inch away from the grill. Then he turned and started running back up the tunnel. It curved and curved, and once more Boba saw all those side passages, black and yawning like huge mouths.

*Don't look at them. Keep your eyes on the tunnel!*

Ahead he could just make out the sliver of light that fell from the trapdoor. He began to run even faster—

And suddenly, he stopped.

"No!" he whispered.

In the middle of the passage, something was crawling toward him. It was more than a half-meter long, with many black, jointed legs and a long, jointed body. Two long, clacking pincers were raised above its mandibles. Its small beady red eyes were fixed on Boba, and its jaws clashed together as it skittered toward him.

A kretch!

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Boba kicked at it. He heard its claws clack, then felt them brush against his leg as it lunged for him. He jumped to one side, but the kretch was too fast—it followed, brushing up against his boot.

Boba kicked it again. This time he felt a satisfying *thump* as his foot connected with the scorpion-like creature. The kretch went flying, and with a loud crack struck the tunnel wall.

But now Boba heard more sounds—other small, clacking creatures skittering up the passage.

He turned to race toward the trapdoor—

And ran right into a tall figure. It was a man, wearing the same drab gray uniform as the guards he had seen surrounding San Hill in Gorga's hideaway.

But this man was no guard or underling. He wore the dress uniform of a high-ranking official in San Hill's employ, a broad decorative belt, and an expression that was equal parts suspicion and command. He smiled grimly down at Boba.

"Going somewhere?" he asked.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Boba stared at the official in dismay. Behind him the kretch insects chattered and clacked. He glanced down at them. Then he grabbed Boba by the arm, turned, and pressed his own hand against the wall. Immediately, a hidden door opened. The official pulled Boba after him. The door closed as the kretch insects hissed and chittered, furious at losing their prey.

“So.” The man gazed down thoughtfully at Boba. “It seems we *do* have a spy in our midst. But not a very careful one. Let’s get a look at you.”

He shone a torch into Boba’s face. The boy shaded his eyes with his hand as the man stooped to stare at Boba intently. He had long, reddish hair, a rugged face. A jagged scar ran from below one eye, across his cheek and to his chin.

“Who are you?” Boba ventured.

“Vice-chair Kos of galactic accounts,” the official replied. He held Boba’s chin in his hand. Boba stared back at him defiantly, saying nothing. The man continued to look at him. Finally Kos shook his head. His eyes narrowed, as his expression changed.

“I know what you are,” he said. “You’re that Clawdite spy we heard about.” A slight, almost admiring, smile creased his face. “Disguised as a boy—very clever.”

Boba began to shake his head no. Then he stopped.

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A Clawdite shapeshifter could look like anyone, or anything his size. The vice-chair thought he was Nuri!

“That’s right,” said Boba slowly. He looked warily up at the official.

The man’s smile hardened. “Well, San Hill has his own methods of dealing with spies.” He began to pull Boba toward him.

“And so does my master,” said Boba.

Kos stopped. He stared at Boba suspiciously. “What do you mean by that?”

Boba hesitated. He had the kind of information a spy would have—real, possibly deadly, information. Out of everyone here on Aargau—out of everyone in the galaxy—only Boba knew that the Count was playing a deadly game. The Count was pretending to be two people, on opposing sides of a great, galaxy-spanning conflict.

It was information worth staking one’s life on. And right now, that’s what Boba was going to do.

“San Hill only knows part of the story,” said Boba. He tried to keep his voice calm.

“And you know the rest?” snapped the vice-chair. But he looked uneasy. He glanced over his shoulder, then drew Boba close to him. “What have you heard?” Kos asked in a whisper. His gloved hands held Boba so tightly the boy’s arm ached. “There have been rumors, a thousand rumors.”

Boba’s heart hammered inside his chest. He was in great danger—but with danger comes opportunity. If he was clever, he could use this official to escape from the Undercity; maybe even to escape from Aargau....

“I know nothing of rumors,” Boba said at last. He held his head up proudly and gazed straight into the vice-chair’s eyes. “I know only the truth—but the truth comes at a price.”

Kos stared fixedly at Boba. He seemed to be weighing his choices.

## Elizabeth Hand

"I don't have all day," said Boba. "And neither do those I serve." He looked knowingly past the vice-chair, as though he saw someone else there.

Kos stiffened. His hand touched his weapons belt, as though for reassurance. "Your price?" he said. "Your miserable shapeshifting skin should be price enough! You tell me what you know, and I'll let you go free—for now."

Boba fought to keep his voice steady. He could sense Kos's fear—if Boba could control his own fear, *he* would have the upper hand. "No. That's not enough. I will share my information—but first you have to bring me to Level Two."

"Level Two?" The vice-chair started laughing. Then his laughter turned to restrained fury. "I could break your neck right here—but after San Hill hears your news, he will devise more entertaining ways to kill you."

"After they hear my news," said Boba softly, "he will kill *you* for not taking me to him sooner. But by then my master will be here, and..."

He let his voice trail off threateningly.

The official stared at him. His face grew dark with anger. His hand moved toward Boba's neck.

Boba took a deep breath. If he was going to die right now, he would die fighting. He gazed unafraid and defiant up at his captor.

But then Kos stopped. He looked at the boy. His scarred face seemed to regard Boba with more respect. At last he nodded.

"All right," he said. "We'll do it your way. Trouble is brewing, that's for sure. Might as well be out of this place when the storm breaks."

He pushed Boba roughly ahead of him. There was the click of a blaster being loosed from its holster. "But don't even dream of escaping. I'll bring you to Level Two—"

"To the Kuat Bank," said Boba quickly.

## STAR WARS: Maze of Deception

For a moment the guard was silent. Then he laughed. “Kuat, eh? Well, someone must be paying you well for your services. But I guess you must be worth it, eh?”

*You don't know the half of it,* Boba thought, as the lieutenant marched him down the dark passage.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

They walked in near-darkness for what seemed like hours, the torch's beam guiding them. But in reality, only a short while had passed—Boba had to remind himself that the darkness was deceptive, like everything else on Aargau.

At last they reached a spot where the tunnel widened. In front of them was a wide metal door. And in front of the door was an airspeeder.

“Get in,” Kos snapped. He kept his blaster trained on Boba.

Boba clambered inside. He couldn't keep from smiling. Just the sight and feel of a cockpit made his blood race with excitement!

“What are you grinning at?” the official said suspiciously.

Boba composed his face into a calmer expression. “I am thinking that you made the right choice,” he said.

This seemed to satisfy the vice-chair. He climbed into the pilot's seat, positioned himself behind the controls, and pressed a button. The wide door slid up, revealing a huge empty airshaft. It stretched up into dark, seemingly limitless space. Boba craned his neck and stared up.

Not limitless. High, high above them he could see a glitter of green.



## STAR WARS: Maze of Deception

“A shortcut,” said the vice-chair. He allowed himself a smile. “This ventilation shaft opens directly onto Level Two. And—lucky for you!—the Kuat vaults are not far at all.”

Without warning he grabbed the controls. The power generator roared to life. With a shudder the airspeeder bucked forward. Then, as Kos hit the throttle, the craft zoomed straight up.

Boba grabbed hold of his seat. This was more like it! He eyed the airspeeder’s controls longingly. The craft rocked back and forth. It rose so quickly Boba’s ears hurt from the abrupt change in air pressure. He looked aside at Kos piloting the craft.

*I could fly this thing better than he can,* Boba thought disdainfully.

Still, he had to admit, the vice-chair did go fast. Mere minutes passed, as they flew up, up, up. Sooner than Boba could have imagined, the speeder came to a halt.

“Well then,” said Kos. The speeder hovered in the air of the shaft. A few feet away was a wall, and a door with a sign on it.

LEVEL TWO, it read in glowing green letters.

A small metal platform extended from the door, hanging out over empty space. Boba turned and looked behind him. More emptiness. He looked up, squinting in the darkness.

He could barely make it out, but there it was. Far above him was a faint red shimmer: Level One. He looked down. He gulped. They must be miles and miles above the Undercity.

“Now.” Kos turned to Boba. His eyes had grown even more intent, even more menacing. “You see that door there? I will open it, and allow you to enter Level Two—but not until you tell me what you know.”

Boba’s gaze shifted from the man to the platform. If he jumped from the airspeeder, he might be able to make it. But even if he succeeded, the door was locked.

And if he fell—

Boba swallowed. He thought of his father: No matter how Jango felt, he would always appear brave.

## Elizabeth Hand

*A lot of the time I'm scared, Boba, he had once said. But if an enemy ever knows you're afraid, you're finished.*

Boba imagined he was as strong and powerful as his father. He imagined himself looking unafraid—even though that was not how he felt.

He said, “San Hill is raising money for the Separatist cause. The Separatists are united behind Count Dooku—”

The vice-chairs's face twisted angrily. “That's not news! Everyone knows that—”

“I'm not finished,” said Boba coolly. “Did you know that a man named Tyranus recruited a bounty hunter named Jango Fett for the Kaminoans to use to create a clone army for the Republic.”

“I'd heard things like that,” Kos admitted, growing more interested.

“Well, I know this: Dooku and Tyranus are the same person.”

The official stared at him in disbelief. After a moment he started to laugh. “You really had me going for a minute,” he said. Then his face darkened. “But I have no time to waste—tell me the truth! What do you know?”

Boba hesitated. He knew he was putting his own life in danger by sharing this secret. But it was the only weapon he had.

“He is helping to build two armies,” Boba went on slowly. “He has spent millions—billions—on both the droids and the clones. And in the end, only he will benefit from a war.”

Boba thought how foolish his own words sounded. But, strangely, the vice-chair seemed to hear them differently.

“Tyranus...is Dooku?” he said in a low voice. “But—”

He shook his head. He looked stunned and disbelieving, but Boba could tell that the seeds of doubt had been sown.

“Are you certain of this?” Kos asked after a minute. “This is treason. The highest kind of treason.”

Boba nodded. Kos stared, thinking, at the control panel. Finally he said, almost to himself, “I must tell San Hill.”

## **STAR WARS: Maze of Deception**

Without another word he steered the airspeeder over to the platform. The craft rocked gently back and forth in the air. The official reached forward and pressed a button. The door onto Level Two slid open.

“Get out,” he said curtly. “Before I change my mind and kill you.”

Boba jumped out, his heart pounding. It took him a second to get his balance. Then he raced toward the open door.

“Wait—” the vice-chair called from behind him.

Boba turned. The man half-stood in his airspeeder, his blaster drawn.

“You took too long,” Kos said in a low voice. “I changed my mind.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

With a gasp Boba turned and sprinted for the door. But before he could reach it, an explosion sounded behind him. He looked back and saw Kos turning to stare at something below his airspeeder. There was the drone of a hoverbike, and another explosive burst that shook the speeder. An instant later, the hoverbike itself came into view. Riding it was a familiar, red-haired figure.

“Aurra,” said Boba in disbelief. As he stared she raised her blaster, her blazing eyes fixed on him.

“Got it in one,” she said, and fired. There was a second blast as the vice-chair returned her fire, and the hoverbike rocked slightly.

Without hesitation Boba lunged for the airspeeder, diving inside just as the craft shot away from the landing platform. Kos glanced down at him, one hand on the controls, the other on his blaster.

“That’s Aurra Sing,” the man said grimly. “If she’s part of all this...”

His voice trailed off. It seemed as though Aurra’s sudden appearance made him take Boba even more seriously. The speeder veered and then swooped into a heart-stopping dive.

## STAR WARS: Maze of Deception

“Take the controls!” Kos shouted as another volley of fire surrounded them.

Boba nodded and jumped into the control seat. The vice-chair turned to monitor Aurra’s pursuit. “There are security forces all over Level Two,” he said, shaking his head. “There’s no way she can get away with this.”

“That’s not gonna help us if we’re dead,” retorted Boba. He steered the speeder around a sharp curve in the airshaft, then yanked back on the controls so that the vehicle abruptly shot up, up, into darkness. “I’ll see if we can lose her.”

Boba stared at the vast space around them, lines of windows and doors reduced to smears of white and green by their speed. Behind them the bike’s hum rose to a furious roar. Blasts of white-hot plasma spun past the airspeeder, giving off a scorched smell. As Aurra Sing scored a direct hit, the speeder gave a violent twist to the left. Boba corrected it quickly. He let the speeder go into a dive as Aurra swung in right behind them, then pulled out and soared up again, the bike screaming in pursuit.

“Are we damaged?” Boba yelled above the roar of the engines.

“Not seriously,” Kos shouted back. His blaster moved furiously back and forth, trying to get a fix on Aurra Sing, but she was too fast. “I’m going to call for reinforcements—”

Boba swallowed. If the vice-chair called for help, other soldiers would arrive. They’d take Aurra into custody—but they’d take him, too. He’d be questioned about what he had told the official, and—

Boba swallowed. He didn’t want to think about what would happen to him if he were brought in for questioning. If what he knew about Dooku and Tyranus became known to San Hill. If it became known to the Count...

He couldn’t let the lieutenant talk. He hunched over the controls, his hands like ice as they grasped the throttle, then punched commands into the panel.

## Elizabeth Hand

“There’s a price on her head,” Boba said. “You’ll be well-rewarded by my master for bringing her in. I’ll set the comm unit to make a distress call,” he lied, pretending to press a small panel of red lights. He glanced back to make sure the vice-chair’s eyes were still on the hoverbike whipping through the air behind them. Then he looked up.

Ahead of them, gaps of deeper darkness appeared, more airshafts or maintenance tunnels. Boba kept his sights on one of these, a triangular opening that yawned bigger and bigger as the speeder raced toward it.

“Now!” breathed Boba. He hit the controls, and the speeder swerved suddenly, disappearing into the lightless tunnel.

“What are you doing?” Kos demanded.

“Evasive action,” said Boba. Behind them, Aurra’s bike swept past the tunnel’s entrance. Boba held his breath.

Sure enough, moments later the bike reappeared, barreling up the dark passage after them.

“Get her in your sights now,” Boba said, pointing at the figure on the bike, a black shadow against the brilliance of the tunnel’s opening. “I’ll keep the speeder steady.”

Kos fumbled with his blaster. “Hard to see her in this,” he muttered. “It’s so dark.”

“That means it’s hard for her to get a fix on you, too,” said Boba.

But that was another lie. Aurra Sing had a predator’s mind and instincts. She also had a predator’s skills. She could see in the dark as keenly as a tuk’ata—

But Kos could not.

Boba held his breath. He slid down as low as he dared, hoping the vice-chair wouldn’t notice. But the official was squinting into the darkness, still trying to get his aim fixed on Aurra.

“There she is,” he murmured. Boba heard the soft click of the blaster’s loading device. Kos raised his arm.

Boba ducked as an explosion ripped through the air beside him.

## STAR WARS: Maze of Deception

But it wasn't the official's blast. It was Aurra's.

"Got him!" she crowed triumphantly. Boba grimaced as Kos's tall form toppled over the side of the speeder, to fall soundlessly into the vast and empty shaft. Too late Boba thought of the vice-chair's weapon—it was gone with him into the depths.

And now Boba was alone with Aurra Sing.

"Thought you could betray me? Think again!"

With a dull whine the hoverbike swept toward Boba's airspeeder. He glanced around, hoping to find something he might use as a weapon.

Nothing. He kept his hands on the controls and stared defiantly across the empty darkness at Aurra.

"Everything is for sale on Aargau," she said with a cruel laugh. "I bought myself citizenship. Too bad you won't live long enough to do the same."

Her laughter died, and she stared at Boba with hatred. "No one escapes from me, Boba. I'm the best at what I do."

"My father was better," said Boba in a low, calm voice. His gaze locked with hers as he continued to stare at her, unafraid. As he did, his hand moved slowly, silently, across the control panel. "My father didn't kill for fun. Or out of fear."

"*Fear?*" Aurra's voice rose almost to a scream. Her eyes blazed, and two crimson spots bloomed on her dead-white face. "You think *I'm* afraid? I think it's time I introduce you to the real thing!"

Her face twisted into a mask of rage. She raised her blaster before her face, the bike steady beneath her. "Good-bye, Boba," she said.

Boba ducked. He jammed his hand onto the controls, hitting the REVERSE DIRECTION command. A flaming pulse from Aurra's blaster zoomed a scant meter above his head. At the same moment, the speeder shot backward. He'd hoped it would slam directly into Aurra's bike. Instead it sideswiped it. Aurra shouted furiously as her arms swung and her next blast went wide. Her

## **Elizabeth Hand**

bike rocked wildly, and she clung to it to keep from plummeting into the abyss.

“Yes!” cried Boba in triumph. The speeder veered back and forth through the passage, barely missing the walls. He finally got control of it, whipping it around so that it soared out from the tunnel and into the vast main shaft. Behind him he could hear Aurra’s angry yelling, and the dull thrum of her bike throttling down. He pointed the speeder in the direction he’d come. With a low roar it began to rush back toward the entrance to Level Two.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Boba knew better than to think he'd lost Aurra for good. She was like a mynock clinging to her prey, difficult to pry loose.

But not impossible. As his speeder drew closer to the entry to Level Two, Boba flicked on the comm unit. Immediately a voice came through the speaker.

*"Sir, we've been unable to contact you for some time. Are you all right?"*

Boba cleared his throat. "I'm fine," he said, trying to make his voice sound as deep and muffled as possible. "But there's a renegade noncitizen loose on Level Two. She's armed. There may be some casualties—"

*And I don't want one of them to be me!*

Behind him came the abrupt high drone of Aurra's bike and another explosive burst. The comm unit went dead. Boba leaned over the controls, not taking his eyes from what was ahead of him: the entry to Level Two.

Closer, closer...He could see the familiar sign, and the door behind it. Sparks of orange and scarlet flame whistled through the air around him as he drew the speeder alongside the landing platform. Keeping his head low he jumped out, turned, and bolted for the door. He shoved it open, and raced through, onto Level Two.

## Elizabeth Hand

Immediately the world around him changed color. Instead of darkness, everything shone with a soft green glow. He was in yet another tunnel, but this one was well lit. At one end a sign blinked on and off.

### EXIT

Boba whirled. At the other end of the tunnel was another blinking sign.

### INTERGALACTICBANK OF KUAT ENTRANCE ONLY

“That’s it!” Boba said aloud. He began to run. From behind the door he’d just left he heard the hoverbike’s drone suddenly shut off. He didn’t need to look back to know that Aurra Sing was at his heels.

Ahead of him a security droid stood beside the entrance to the bank. “May I see your card, please?” it asked in its mechanized voice.

Boba dug into his pocket. For a second his heart stopped: He’d lost the card!

But no, it was still there. He yanked it out and handed it to the droid. The droid raised the card before its infrared eyes and scanned it. Then it took Boba’s hand. There was a flicker of heat as it read his DNA. Then it nodded.

“Very good,” it said. “You may enter.”

“Stop him!” Aurra’s voice raged from the far end of the tunnel.

“You better check her citizen papers,” Boba said breathlessly to the security droid. “She’s armed and I think her papers are forged.”

He pushed open the door and hurried into the bank. Behind him he could hear Aurra’s boots racing up to the entrance. Then he heard the droid’s calm voice.

## STAR WARS: Maze of Deception

“May I see your citizen papers, please?” it asked. The door slammed and locked behind Boba. He grinned as he heard Aurra’s voice rise in frustrated rage.

“May I help you?”

It was another droid, this one neatly clad in gold-and-silver hardware. It stood before an immense black wall. Set into the wall were thousands upon thousands of small boxes, each with a number.

“I want to get what is mine,” Boba said, gasping. “My father—he left something for me here when he died.”

“Of course,” said the droid politely. “May I see your card, please?”

Boba handed the card to him. The droid turned and rolled along the front of the wall. Finally it stopped. It punched the card into a slot in the wall. One of the boxes slid open. One of the droid’s mechanical arms withdrew something from it. It closed the box, turned, and rolled back to Boba.

“This closes your account,” he said, and handed Boba a small leather pouch. The robot stuck the card into another slot inside its chest. There was a hiss and a wisp of smoke. The card had been destroyed.

Boba looked down at the pouch. It seemed awfully small. He opened it, and poured a handful of shining, multicolored credits into his hand.

“Is this all?” he asked. He shook his head. “My father left me a fortune!”

“There was a large withdrawal made from this account today,” the droid said in its calm voice. “Five hundred thousand mesarcs. That is what remains. Your account is now closed,” it said with finality, and rolled away.

Boba stared after it in disbelief. Then he looked at the money in his hand. From the passage behind him, he could hear voices.

“Let go of me! I tell you, these papers are legal! I’m allowed to carry a blaster!”

## Elizabeth Hand

It sounded like Aurra Sing was having a hard time with Aargau security. Even as Boba turned to look, a side door opened. Heavily armed soldiers wearing uniforms identical to the vice-chair's poured into the corridor. He watched as they ran toward where security had detained Aurra Sing, their boots echoing loudly. Moments later he heard Aurra Sing's shout of rage as the soldiers surrounded her.

*"No—let me go, you'll never—"*

Boba fought back a shiver. He felt no pity for Aurra—she would have killed him as easily as she'd killed the lieutenant, and with more pleasure. But he knew that losing her freedom would be far worse for Aurra Sing than losing her share of his father's fortune.

Still, she probably wouldn't be imprisoned or detained for long. Boba would bet his life on that.

But not right now. Right now, Boba planned to hang on to every bit of currency he had. He looked at the money in his hand—not a huge fortune, maybe, but still enough to outfit a ship. Still enough to get him off Aargau. He put the money back into the leather pouch and closed it. He put it carefully into his pocket, along with his father's book. Then he turned and began walking quickly down the corridor, back to Level One.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

No one questioned him when he bought the fuel and provisions for his ship. And no one questioned him when he climbed aboard, after obtaining clearance to depart Aargau. Money might not buy happiness, but it bought a lot of other things that were useful.

Boba settled himself in the cockpit of *Slave I*. It felt like coming home again—for the first time. He strapped himself in, hit the controls, and settled back. A moment later he felt the familiar rush and roar of takeoff.

Within moments Aargau was far, far behind him. Boba gazed out the screen at the glittering planet. He wondered briefly about the people he'd seen there. The young clone 9779. The Clawdite Nuri—if that was really his name. The manipulative San Hill.

What would become of them all, Boba wondered? And what would become of the Separatist cause, led by the double-crossing Count Dooku?

And Aurra Sing?

Aurra Sing might be in custody for now, but Boba knew she wouldn't stay there for long. She was too smart for that. And when she got free, she'd come looking for him.

## **Elizabeth Hand**

Boba smiled with determination. When he next met up with Aurra Sing, he'd be ready for her. For now, he had other things on his mind.

Boba knew where his immediate future was—with the notorious gangster Jabba the Hutt!

With a grin, he leaned over the control panel and punched in the coordinates for Tatooine.







**STAR  
WARS**™

***BOBA FETT***™

HUNTED

ELIZABETH HAND





# CHAPTER ONE

Some people believe that space is empty. Boba Fett's father, Jango Fett, had been one of those people.

"Space is emptiness," Jango had told his son. "And emptiness is useless, until it is filled with work, energy, or people, or starships. A good bounty hunter may seem invisible at times. But he knows how to use the space around him. And if he is using that space, it is not empty."

Boba did not think space was empty. Gazing out at the space that surrounded his ship, *Slave I*, he thought that space was full, and brilliant, and beautiful. There were planets everywhere, and stars. He saw distant flares of green, or gold, or red that were nebulas, or galaxies, or even vast starships.

Still, he did agree with his father on one thing. No matter what intergalactic space was, Boba knew he had to make the most of it.

"Approaching destination," a cool, computerized voice from *Slave I*'s controls informed him. "Approaching Tatooine."

Boba leaned forward. He ran his hand across *Slave I*'s piloting console. His fingers touched buttons, switches, and skin-sensitive navigational aids. He smiled.

He was part of the complex space inside this starship. *His* starship, since his father's death. Just days ago, on the planet

## Elizabeth Hand

Aargau, Boba had seized *Slave I* back from Aurra Sing, the notorious bounty hunter who had stolen it from him.

Aargau was the galaxy's banking planet. There, Boba had also regained what remained of his father's fortune—just enough credits to spend on outfitting *Slave I* for this journey.

"Estimated time of landing, 01200 mesarcs," the computer said. "Breaching Tatooine airspace."

Tatooine.

Boba Fett stared out at the planet before him. It was a vast bone-colored sphere, streaked here and there with darker brown and white. In the distance, Tatooine's twin suns blazed dull orange. They were like demonic eyes staring back at Boba.

No, space was not empty.

He leaned forward and punched a command into the control console. With a dull roar, *Slave I* pierced the desert planet's atmosphere. The ship began to hurtle toward Tatooine's surface. The twin suns grew smaller, less bright. But they remained ominous. Boba gazed out at the desert world, grimacing.

*This sure isn't a place where you'd want to spend much time*, he thought.

Sandstorms, oceans of sand dunes, drought-stricken canyons, moisture farms, and unrelenting heat. From what Boba had heard, Tatooine filled its own space with some pretty awful stuff.

*So remind me why I'm going here?*

Boba smiled grimly. He knew the answer to that question.

His father, Jango, had been killed by a Jedi Knight named Mace Windu. But as one of the galaxy's greatest bounty hunters (*the* greatest, in Boba's opinion), Jango had lived every day knowing that he might die.

And he had loved his son. To prepare Boba in case the worst ever happened, Jango had left him a book. In this book were screens of information, advice, and encouragement. All were written in his father's own words. Sometimes the book showed his father's own image, too.

“Hold onto this book,” Jango Fett’s face and voice told him when Boba looked inside the book. “Keep it close to you. Open it when you need it. It will guide you when you need guidance. It is not a story but a Way. Follow this Way and someday you will be a great bounty hunter, Boba.”

That was what Boba wanted more than anything. To be a great bounty hunter, like his father had been. To know that his father would have been proud of him.

Sometimes, late at night when he was alone and scrolling through the book, Boba pretended that his father was still alive, somewhere.

But he could never pretend that for very long.

Now the book was in his pocket. Boba did not need to look at it. He knew the advice it held for him regarding Tatooine.

“For knowledge you must find Jabba,” the book said. “He will not give it; you must take it.”

Jabba the Hutt! One of the galaxy’s most notorious gangsters and crime lords! And Tatooine’s most famous, if disgusting, resident.

Jabba was why Boba was about to make landfall on this forsaken, desolate planet.

Boba had already found Tyranus. That was how Boba had ended up on Aargau. Tyranus was the agent who had selected Jango Fett to be the source for the Republic’s clone army.

But Tyranus was also Count Dooku, who was leading the Republic’s enemies, the Separatists. And only Boba had the knowledge that these two people were the same.

*Knowledge is power*, his father had always told him. But even the power of knowledge could be limited.

*For knowledge you must find Jabba. He will not give it; you must take it.*

Boba had escaped from Aurra Sing and Aargau, but he needed more credits to survive. He needed more power. He needed more knowledge. He took a deep breath, then reached

**Elizabeth Hand**

for the console and entered the coordinates for Mos Espa, Tatooine's bustling spaceport.

“Prepare for landing,” he said to his ship, and to himself.

Boba hated to admit it, but he needed Jabba the Hutt.

## CHAPTER TWO

“Planets are like people,” Boba’s father always used to say. “They all have individual personalities.”

At the time, this hadn’t made sense to Boba.

Since then, Boba had learned that it was true.

Kamino, his home world, was gray and grim and cloud-covered, plagued by rains that could last for months on end. The native Kaminoans were like their planet. They were cool and seemingly unchanging, well-mannered but obsessed with control. They were the ideal supervisors for the creation of the clone army.

Aargau, run by the InterGalactic Banking Clan, was strictly ordered on its surface. But underneath that orderly surface was the chaos of the Undercity. In the Undercity, *anything* could happen.

And Tatooine?

As *Slave I* banked, Boba stared at the spaceport below him. It was a jumble of domes, pleasure spires, and gambling minarets. He saw long, low warehouses, and the rusted spines of outdated space-traffic control towers. He saw racing arenas, coliseums, and junkshops. Biggest of all was the enormous Arena Citadel. That was where the Pod-racers began their competition, before hurtling off into the desert.

## Elizabeth Hand

Everything was coated with a thick layer of dust. Mos Espa's ragtag buildings looked as though they had crawled in from the desert like giant sand-worms, and then collapsed, too exhausted to go on. Beyond the borders of the spaceport stretched the vast expanse of the Dune Sea, wastelands of sand and dust and wind-carved rocks.

*If Tatooine has a personality,* Boba thought with bleak amusement, *it's a mixed-up one.*

*Slave I* cruised slowly above the network of docking bays. From here they looked like craters, bristling with surveillance and repair equipment. Droids scurried around them like ants. Boba stared down, trying to determine which docking bay would be safest. He had barely enough credits left to pay for docking, and none for refueling. He'd have no more credits at all until he met with Jabba the Hutt.

*What would my father do?* he thought.

And suddenly he knew.

He put on his father's Mandalorian helmet, which, he noticed proudly, fit better than it had just a few months ago. He felt a slight warmth as the helmet's eye sensors scanned his retinas, and then the reassuring hum as the interactive system recognized him.

He searched *Slave I*'s memory banks for the location of the docking facility last used by Jango Fett.

The nav computer informed him that the docks belonged to Mentis Qinx.

Boba punched in the coordinates. He leaned back in the control seat. Smooth as flowing water, the ship banked. It began its descent into a warren of dilapidated towers surrounding a large and very battered docking bay.

Boba smiled. He adjusted the Mandalorian helmet. He checked to make sure his book was in his pocket. Minutes later, *Slave I* landed safely at Mos Espa.

He had made it. But that was only the beginning.

He had to find Jabba.



Boba decided to wear the helmet, at least at first. That way no one would know how young he was. He was dressed in standard-issue Mandalorian uniform—gray-blue tunic and trousers, darker shirt, high black boots. With the helmet covering his face, he might be anyone of small stature. He might be a Mrlssi physicist, or a Bimm merchant, or a Sullustan pilot.

Nobody had to know he was just a kid.

He cleared his throat, then clambered out of *Slave I* and into the docking bay.

The air of Tatooine struck him like a fist. Hot, dry air, so saturated with grit and dust that he could taste it on his tongue, despite the protective helmet. A few meters away, small service droids scurried and rolled beneath another ship. There were fuel lines and repair equipment scattered everywhere. Boba looked around for someone in charge, standing as straight as he could to project confidence.

“Sir!” a smooth voice greeted him, recognizing the ship. “Jango Fett, is it?”

A gleaming figure was approaching him—a silver-plated 3D-4X administrative droid. Its blunt, tube-shaped head whirled as it looked from Boba to *Slave I*.

“Fett, that’s right,” Boba said. He felt a small surge of relief. A droid would be easier to fool than a human or an alien. “I need to leave my ship here for a while.”

“Very good, very good,” said the droid. It halted. Boba could hear a garbled stream of syllables coming through its communications transmitter. After a moment it turned back to him. “Master Qinx wishes you to be reminded that there is a small matter of an outstanding debit on your account.”

Boba swallowed. Inside the helmet his face felt as though it were melting. He took a deep breath, squared his shoulders and said, “I am aware of that. Here—”

## Elizabeth Hand

Boba held out a credit chip, all that remained of his father's fortune. The droid scanned it, then rotated its head.

"That is not enough."

"I'm aware of that, too," Boba said quickly. He was glad the droid couldn't see his face. "Please inform your master that I have a private audience with Jabba the Hutt regarding some old business of my own. Once I've met with Jabba, I'll make payment in full."

"Master Quinx specifically stated that—"

Boba shook his head. "I am certain that your master would not want to make me late for my meeting with Jabba," he said in the warning tone he'd heard his father use so many times. "Of course, I can inform Jabba that there will be a delay...."

Boba turned and took a step back toward his ship. His breath came too fast in his throat. What if the droid knew he was bluffing?

Behind him he could hear the whine of the 3D-4X's communicator.

"Very well," the droid said. Its smooth voice sounded slightly anxious. "Of course, we do not want to delay your meeting with Jabba the Hutt. Will there be anything you need upon your return?"

Safe behind his helmet, Boba grinned. *Why not?*

"Yes," he said. "Please provide a full overhaul and restocking of my ship. And refuel it."

"Very well, sir." The droid began to stride purposefully toward the service droids. "You, there! Leave that and get over here immediately!"

Boba watched as the droids began to surround *Slave I*, beeping and whirring. Then he turned and headed for the ramp that led down to the streets.

*Maybe this will be easier than I thought!* He smoothed the front of his tunic and walked outside, head held high. *Jabba, here I come!*

In less than a minute, he was hopelessly lost.

## CHAPTER THREE

From the air, Mos Espa had looked confusing, but not chaotic. Boba had recognized streets and alleys, even major roads leading into the desert. It was all complicated, but he assumed there was a pattern. And if there was a pattern, he would figure out how to use it.

But as soon as he stepped from the overhang of the docking bay, Boba realized there was no pattern here. There was no logic, except the logic of buying and selling and stealing.

For just a moment, Boba forgot about appearing to be in control.

“Wow,” he breathed, amazed.

From the air, Mos Espa—all of Tatooine—had seemed to be one color. The color of sand, of dust, of raw rock.

But now that he stood in the middle of it all, Boba saw that was not true. His father had told him once about seeing the world in a grain of sand. That was what Boba felt like he was seeing now.

Around him was a swirl of deep gold, pale buff, almost white. Ancient buildings made of cracked rock and brick; roads of broken stones and alleys of packed dirt. There were water harvesters and rusted tankers, and cracked useless water vaporators.

## Elizabeth Hand

And there were life-forms everywhere. They hurried past him, shrouded against the relentless wind and dust. He saw groups of tiny Jawas in stained, dirt-colored robes and hoods. Their yellow eyes glowed balefully as they moved on. Some of them rode tall, placid rontos that swung their horned heads to stare calmly at Boba.

There were jabbering merchants, selling water and smuggled goods. There were Feeorin pirates, their faces jowled with indigo tentacles, and beautifully dressed women, heavily jeweled and masked as they made their way to Hutt casinos.

“Magravian spice, m’lord?” a voice hissed at Boba’s helmet. “It will make your reflexes sharp as chrystalide claws!”

Boba shook his head as a snouted Rodian thrust a filthy hand toward him.

“No thanks,” Boba said. He took a few quick steps into the street.

“GEGGAOURRAAY!” a voice shouted.

Boba looked up and saw a huge form bearing down on him. It was a bantha, its large, sloped body swaying back and forth. On its back stood an armed Tusken Raider. Boba stared at it, marvelling: He knew it was rare to see one so far from its desert home.

The Raider yelled threateningly at Boba. Boba couldn’t understand what it was saying, but he knew what it meant.

*Move!*

Boba lunged out of the way. He could feel the bantha’s stiff fringe of hair brushing against him as it lumbered past. He heard the *whoosh* of the Raider’s staff slicing through the air just above him.

*That was close—way too close,* Boba thought.

He hurried on. Ahead of him stood a bustling, run-down building: a cantina. Droids and aliens, recent immigrants and Tatooine natives all milled in front of it, or made their way in and out. Suspicious-looking men in dusty robes hawked caged

beasts—chittering neeks from Ambria and crablike suuri, phosphorescent boeys in glass globes.

“Young warrior!” a smuggler called in a low voice as Boba passed. “I have blasters, the very finest, very cheap, very fine.”

Boba ignored him. Only as he approached the cantina’s doors did he slow down.

From inside came the sounds of drunken singing, muffled shouts, the clack of mung-tee balls.

And, best of all, the smell of food.

Boba paused. His mouth was watering. He knew he had no credits left, but maybe he might be able to swipe an unfinished platter of food. Grown-ups were notorious for not cleaning their plates. He looked around, made sure his helmet was on securely, and pushed the door open.

Inside the noise was deafening. So was the hulking Noghri security guard who glared down at Boba.

“Display all your weapons!” he shouted. “This isn’t like those cantinas in Mos Eisley—we’ll have no firefights here.”

Boba raised his empty hands. The Noghri roughly patted him down. Boba held his breath. He was worried that the guard might raise his helmet and see that he was not a warrior of small stature, but a kid.

Luckily, the Noghri had no time for that. Behind Boba a group of rowdy Wookiees appeared.

“Go on, then!” the guard yelled at Boba, gesturing inside. “Next!”

Boba strode through a passage and into the main room. A long, neon purple bar occupied its center, with tables scattered elsewhere. Piped-in music played, adding to the tumult. There were aliens and humans everywhere, heads bent close together as they plotted and planned, or simply ate and drank. Service droids bustled back and forth, clearing dishes and refilling drinks.

Boba looked around.

“There!” he murmured. Near the back of the room he spied an abandoned table. It still had plates on it. Boba glanced around

## Elizabeth Hand

to make sure no one took note of him. He casually sauntered over to the table.

“Yes!” he whispered to himself. “Jackpot!”

Someone had left an entire roba plate untouched. Beside it steamed a heaping mound of yan legumes. Boba reached out, grabbed the roba and drew it to his mouth.

Still warm! He took a bite, chewed, and swallowed; then reached for the yan.

“Hey!”

Boba gulped. He turned to see a tall woman in a Myrkr pilot’s uniform. She scowled at him, her hand resting lightly on the blaster at her hip.

“Uh, sorry,” stammered Boba. “I thought this was my table.”

Another pilot appeared behind the first. Boba started to back away, when a crushingly huge hand descended onto his shoulder.

“Mandalorian scum!” said a deep voice. “You dare to breathe the same air as I do?”

Boba twisted. He looked up to see a figure easily three meters tall. From helmeted head to booted feet, he was clad in a shining carapace of armor. He carried a blaster as long as his arm; knives and more blasters hung around his waist.

But worst of all was what he bore on his chest: the livid image of a Mandalorian skull.

“Is there a problem, Durge?” one of the pilots said.

*Durge.*

Boba stared at him. His hands and neck suddenly went cold. In front of him stood an imposing figure. Inside his helmet, his eyes glowed a malevolent red.

“When I see a Mandalorian,” Durge said, raising his arm, “there is always a problem. Especially one that Count Dooku has asked me to hunt down.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

Boba's heart hammered his chest. But he stood his ground and stared at the figure before him.

Durge! His father had warned Boba about him. A two-thousand-year-old bounty hunter, Durge hated the Mandalorians more than anything else in the galaxy. A hundred years before Boba was born, Durge had attempted to capture the Mandalorians' leader. Instead, he himself was captured and tortured.

But Durge escaped. He went into hibernation to recover from his wounds. When he emerged fully healed, he vowed revenge upon all Mandalorians.

Yet it was too late for revenge. By then, there were few Mandalorians left in the galaxy. They had been exterminated in the course of countless battles, some with the Jedi.

Still, part of Jango Fett remained alive in the clone army generated from his DNA. Durge had vowed to eliminate all of Jango's clones...and do Count Dooku's bidding.

What would he do if he knew that Jango's true son stood before him?

*I'm not gonna wait to find out,* thought Boba grimly.

He took a deep breath. Just as Durge's fist came smashing down toward him, Boba dove between the bounty hunter's legs.

## Elizabeth Hand

*Good thing he's so tall!* Boba hit the floor running.

"Get him!"

Boba raced for the door. Service droids bleeped and scurried away. Near the door, three Wookiees backed against the wall, giving deep bellows of excitement.

*BLAAAAAMM!*

A burst of blaster fire ricocheted overhead. Boba could hear shouts and a blast of answering fire.

"Hey, you!" shouted the Noghri guard as the young bounty hunter whizzed by. The guard snatched at him, but Boba was too fast. In seconds he was outside again.

"Glad I'm outta there!" he gasped.

He kept running, until the cantina was out of sight behind him. There were still throngs of people everywhere, but no one seemed to notice him at all.

*Probably used to folks being chased,* thought Boba. He turned and continued running down a side street.

He was starting to get tired. *I better rest soon, before I—*

With a grunt, Boba tripped on a pile of rubble. Crying out, he fell forward onto a cracked sidewalk. Instinctively his hands reached out to break his fall.

But it wasn't enough to keep him from crashing onto the hard, dusty ground.

*"Oooof—"*

He went down, headfirst, hard enough that the breath was knocked out of him. Too late he remembered his helmet.

"No!"

Helplessly, Boba felt the helmet bounce from his head. He grabbed at it. For just an instant, he felt its smooth metal surface. Then it slid from his grasp.

It was gone.

Around him was a sea of legs and feet—booted feet, hooved feet, clawed feet.

Where was his helmet?



Frantically, Boba scrambled forward on his hands and knees. He ignored the curses and jeers of those who had to step around him. A booted foot kicked at him. Someone else laughed. Boba gritted his teeth and kept going.

There!

He could just see it, only an arm's length away. There was the familiar smooth sweep of black that hid his face when the helmet was where it belonged.

Boba stumbled to his feet, his hand stretched out to grab the helmet.

And just as he did, someone else snatched it from him!

"Looking for something?"

Boba straightened, furious. "That's mine! Give it to me!"

"Yours?" The voice snorted in disbelief. "I don't think so."

Boba looked up. In front of him stood a girl. She was maybe a year younger than he was. She was smaller than Boba, and much dirtier. Her face was streaked with dust and soot. So was her hair. It looked brown, but Boba suspected it might be dark blond beneath the layer of grime. She was skinny, almost starved-looking, and wore tattered cast-off clothes—an Ugnaught mechanic's smock, much too big and belted around the waist with a piece of filthy rope. Her eyes were blue and piercing.

She might have been younger than he was, but she looked just as determined.

"Where would *you* get a Mandalorian battle helmet?" she demanded. She held it up and stared at it thoughtfully. "This is worth a *lot*," she continued. She gave Boba a look that was both suspicious and admiring. "Where'd you steal it?"

"I didn't!" He lunged, grabbing for it, but she was too fast. Before he could say another word, she was already on the far side of the road, running with the helmet under her arm.

Boba stared after her, stunned.

"No one takes what's mine!" he shouted, and raced in pursuit.

## CHAPTER FIVE

The winding road was even more crowded than the one he'd left. But this time, Boba's size helped him. He could wriggle in and out of the throng as quickly as a Ralltiiriel. He could easily keep the girl in view, since she wasn't bigger than he was. He found that he was enjoying chase.

He followed her, panting, past dark doorways where smugglers lurked, down narrow alleys crowded with pack animals like hairy tybis and immense banthas. He raced through an open market-place taken up by a huge starship surrounded by twittering Jawas. They were already gutting it to sell on the black market. The girl ran on tirelessly, her bare feet slapping the ground.

"Stop!" Boba yelled.

When he saw the looks the Jawas gave him, he realized yelling was a mistake. After that he ran in silence, saving his energy for the chase.

On and on she ran. Boba had to duck under low awnings, jump over heaps of rubbish and the steaming remains of a beggar's tiny campfire. But after a few more minutes he began to gain on her. The girl thief was small and fast, and she knew her way around Mos Espa.

Boba was stronger.

And the Mandalorian helmet was heavy and hard for her to carry. He could tell from the way she clutched it to her side. Once she almost dropped it, and Boba thought he'd get it back at last. His hand stretched out, he could feel the rough cloth of her dirty smock and the smooth curve of his helmet...

With a cry she yanked the helmet closer, hugging it to her thin chest. She made a sharp turn and ran into a building, Boba at her heels.

He didn't pause to look up and see where he was going. If he had, he might have hesitated. The building was a mere shell. Spindly pieces of wood leaned against each other to form a doorway. A ragged piece of cloth dangled in front of it like a discarded shroud.

But Boba didn't bother to stop. He raced after her. Seconds later he was plunged into darkness.

He halted, struggling for breath. He cocked his head, listening. He could hear someone else panting.

The girl.

"I know you're there," he said. Suddenly, he was so angry he didn't stop to think of what his father would do in a place like this—which would *not* have been what Boba did next.

Without looking around, he stuck his hand in front of him. Then he stepped forward.

Something soft brushed his leg. He moved away, thinking it was a piece of the dirty cloth in the doorway.

It wasn't. Before he could blink, hands covered his eyes. Other hands grabbed him by the ankles, yanking him down.

"Hey—!"

"Not a word, stranger."

He tensed, lifting his hand to strike out. Then he felt something cold against his throat.

A knife.

"If you move, you're dead," someone said in a low voice.

## Elizabeth Hand

Boba took a deep breath, forcing his body to go limp. Hands patted him down, slid into his pocket, and closed around his book.

“Here’s something!”

Without thinking Boba started to yank it back. The icy blade pressed harder against his throat. Boba used every ounce of his will to remain motionless.

“What is it?” someone whispered.

“A book.”

The first someone made a scornful noise. “A book? Who needs a *book*? Get rid of it!”

“Give it to me!” Boba recognized the voice of the girl thief. “If you’d ever *read* a book, Murzz, you might have been able to grow a brain between your ears.”

He heard scuffling, then a muffled cry; then the girl’s voice again.

“Wow. Look at this!” This time she didn’t sound suspicious—just admiring. “Let’s see what else he’s got!”

More small hands checked his pockets, his cuffs, even the inside of his boots. They found nothing.

*I could save you all a lot of trouble*, thought Boba fiercely, *if you’d let me go!*

He stared at the blackness that surrounded him. He blinked. His eyes were starting to grow accustomed to the dark. He could just make out a shadowy form kneeling at his side—the person who held the blade to his throat. There were two—no, three—other, smaller figures moving around him.

None of them seemed to be the girl. He squinted, but he still couldn’t see her.

But he could hear her.

“Keep looking!” she commanded from the shadows. “Whoever this boy is, he’s got some interesting cargo. *Very* interesting.”

Small fingers danced across Boba’s cheeks, tapping his ears and then his mouth.

*They're looking for jewels,* Boba thought. *And gold teeth.*

He lay motionless, waiting until one of the fingers thrust into his mouth. Then he bit down.

Hard.

*"Ommmmmm!"*

Figures scampered away from him into the cavernous room. Boba grabbed the hand at his throat. He twisted it until he heard a groan, followed by the soft clatter of metal hitting the ground. Boba struck out blindly. He felt his hand smack into a small form that went sprawling. Boba scrambled to his feet, grabbing the person who'd fallen beside him.

"Ygabba, help!"

"Be quiet!" said Boba. He yanked the figure up again. Through the darkness he glimpsed a small, thin face, matchstick arms, and a wild frizz of black hair like smoke.

Just a kid. He was a lot smaller and younger than Boba, too.

Boba felt a stab of pity. But then he remembered the cold touch of the blade at his throat. He glanced down and saw a glint of silver near his foot. Still keeping a tight hold on the boy, Boba stooped and grabbed the blade. He glared into the shadows.

"Give me back my helmet," he shouted. "Otherwise—"

"Otherwise what?"

It was the girl. By now he could see well enough to recognize her as she stepped toward him. She held up a small plasteel torch and switched it on. Bright white light flooded the room. Boba shaded his face. At his side the small boy writhed and tried to get free.

"You won't hurt him," the girl went on. She stared at Boba with eyes brilliant and piercing as the torchlight. "You're not like us."

*You're not like us.* She made it sound like a dare.

Boba glared back at her and said, "No, I'm not. I'm not a thief, for one."

## Elizabeth Hand

“Oh, no?” The girl gave him a cold smile. She held up the Mandalorian helmet—*his* helmet—and the book. *His* book. “Then how’d you get this? And this?”

Boba stared back at her just as coldly. “Those are mine.”

At his side the small boy began to whimper. Boba looked down at him. “Be quiet,” he whispered.

Boba looked at the blade in his own hand, and then at the girl. He saw a flicker of unease cross her thin face.

Unease? Or could it be fear?

*Fear is your friend, if it is your enemy’s fear*, his father used to say.

But the girl did not seem afraid of Boba. She continued to stare at him defiantly. He saw her gaze dart to the boy he held captive.

*She’s not afraid of me*, Boba thought. *She’s afraid for him*.

“Give my things back to me and I’ll let him go,” Boba said. “See?” He held up the blade, then slid it into his belt. “All I want is what’s mine.”

An edge of desperation crept into his voice. Not because he was afraid—though he was, of course. Only a fool is never afraid.

*I can’t lose those*. He felt the pit of his stomach grow cold, as though someone held a knife there. *That’s all I have of him*.

“Yours?” The girl gave a bitter laugh. “I don’t believe it. But—”

She stepped toward him. Behind her, Boba could glimpse the other children standing watchfully.

“You must be very clever, or very lucky, to have gotten your hands on a Mandalorian battle helmet,” she went on. “We are always looking for clever recruits. And lucky ones.”

Boba shook his head. “I’m not interested. I work alone.”

A hard smile crept slowly across the girl’s thin face. “Then you won’t last very long on Tatooine,” she said. “And you’ll need all the luck you can get.”

Slowly she raised her arm, her hand curled into a fist. The other children did the same. Boba stared at them. Like poisonous

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flowers blooming, the children's fists unclenched. They held them up, palm out, so that Boba could see.

In the center of every palm was a single eye. And every one of them was fixed on Boba Fett.

## CHAPTER SIX

“What—what are those?” Boba stammered.

“The Master’s eyes,” the girl called Ygabba replied calmly.

“The Master?”

Without another word the girl turned and walked into the darkness. Boba stared after her, confused and unnerved. At his side the small boy gave a pitiful wail. Boba looked down, ashamed—he’d almost forgotten him.

“Ygabba!” the boy cried. The girl kept going without a backward glance. “Ygabba, *please*, wait!”

Boba felt guilty. He steeled himself at the thought of those lidless eyes. His hold on the boy’s wrist loosened, just a fraction.

But that was enough. With a shrill laugh the boy yanked his hand free. He slipped from Boba’s grasp and ran gleefully after the others. Boba groaned and followed.

It took only minutes for him to catch up. The dim room narrowed to a single tunneling passage. Its walls were made of some flimsy transparent material. Sand had seeped through gashes in the sides. He could see the others a short distance ahead of him. They were walking with no real urgency. He could hear laughter, and snatches of conversation.

“...will the Master be happy now?”

“I don’t care, as long as he feeds us!”



“*Shhh*, all of you!”

Ahead of him Boba saw the tunnel widen into a circular opening. It glowed a dull orange. As the others ran through, they looked like black shadow puppets against a fire. Last of all came Boba. He peered around in search of the girl thief.

“Welcome, stranger,” her voice greeted him.

He looked up. There she was, perched on a high metal shelf. She lifted her hand and he could see the extra eye watching him. Her bare legs swung back and forth. His helmet was in her lap.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “They can’t hurt you. The eyes, I mean.”

Boba turned, looking around in amazement.

He was inside the cabin of a starship. Not just any starship, either, but a Theed Cruiser—he recognized it from blueprints he’d studied in his father’s quarters back on Kamino.

“How—how did this get here?” he asked.

“Same way a Mandalorian helmet got into your hands,” said the girl, and laughed. “Someone stole it.”

She picked up his helmet. For a long moment she looked at it. Then she turned and stuffed it into some kind of storage compartment. She punched in a security code. The compartment door slid shut. She stood, looking down at Boba’s anguished face.

“Don’t worry,” she said. She stepped to the edge of the shelf, swung herself down, and walked over to Boba. “It’s safer there,” she added in a low voice. “Trust me.”

“Trust you?” Boba started to shout. “You—”

The girl motioned at him to be quiet. He glimpsed the eye in her hand, its pupil black as the darkest ink. She raised her eyebrows, silently indicating the vast room around them.

Boba’s mouth clamped shut. He turned and looked around.

It wasn’t an entire cruiser, he saw now. Just the cabin. Huge ragged gashes showed where the wings and the power generators had been removed. What remained was a long, high chamber. Bare wires and scorched coils of metal hung from the ceiling.

## **Elizabeth Hand**

There were holes in the floor. The dull orange light came from lumen globes suspended overhead like immense insect eggs. Bits of shattered circuitry were everywhere, and broken tiles, and remnants of what looked like weaponry—electromagnetic pulse guns, proton torpedo casings, phasers.

And, everywhere, there were children. Dozens of them. They perched on the metal shelves that circled the chamber, staring down at him with hungry, feral eyes. He had never seen humans or aliens so thin, not even the Kaminoans. They were of as many different races and colors as the galaxy could hold—children from Alderaan, Kalarba, Tatooine; green-eyed Kuats, young Dathomir witches, otterlike Selonians.

The only thing they had in common, as far as Boba could see, was that they all looked starved. They all looked afraid. And every one of them had an extra eye.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“Who—who are you?” Boba turned to the thief. “What is this place?”

“I’m Ygabba.” The girl smoothed the front of her filthy tunic. She looked uneasy. “And this is the stronghold of the Master’s army.”

“Army?” Boba looked at the emaciated figures staring down at him. “My father always said an army travels on its stomach. Doesn’t look like this one’s going anywhere.”

Shocked murmurs came from the watching figures. Ygabba shook her head. “I wouldn’t talk like that if I were you,” she said in a low voice. “The Master wouldn’t be too happy.”

“Master? What Master?” Boba stared at her. “I don’t see anyone in charge here.”

The children whispered. Ygabba gave an anxious glance over her shoulder. “I mean it,” she said. “You better not—”

Her eyes suddenly widened.

“Master!” she gasped. She raised her hands before her face, then dropped to the floor, cowering. “Master Libkath...”

Boba whirled to see what she stared at. The air flickered and brightened as though shining sand was being poured into an invisible bottle. Slowly, slowly, an alien form appeared in the middle of the chamber. He was tall and thin, clad in deep-blue

## Elizabeth Hand

shimmering robes. He looked even taller because of the hat he wore, a gleaming black mitre like a crown. His hands were gnarled and sickly white, as was his face. His eyes were huge and round. They glowed the same dull orange as the chamber's lumen globes. With terrible slow care he raised his head and stared intently into the room. When he spoke, his voice was disturbingly gentle. It had a quiet hiss like a boiling kettle.

"Who am I?" he asked.

There was a hushed intake of breath in the chamber. The children raised their hands. In every one a cold eye gleamed.

"You are our Master, Libkath," the children said as one.

The tall figure nodded. "That is so. Who cares for you, children?"

"You do, Master."

"Who gives you refuge?" he asked.

"You do, Master," repeated the children.

The eyes stared at the figure. He stared back. After a moment he nodded again.

"That is so." A half-smile crawled across his reptilian face. "And what do I ask in return?"

"Obedience, Master."

"Very good." The figure lifted its hands, turning. Boba felt his stomach clench as those round, glowing eyes fixed on him.

"There will be many people at the Podraces tonight," the figure said. "That means there will be many vessels parked outside the Arena Citadel. Many guards, but also many unwary soldiers who will have had too much to drink. A shipment of smuggled weapons will be outside the northwest gate. You are to bring them here."

The children whispered, "Yes, Master."

The figure stared straight at Boba. "What does failure mean?" he hissed.

Boba opened his mouth but said nothing.

"Failure means destruction," said Master Libkath. "Do not fail."

And with a blinding flash, the figure disappeared.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Boba blinked. It took him a minute to register exactly what he had seen.

Not an actual person at all, but a holo. A virtual sending.

He had never been in any real danger. Master Libkath, whoever he was, had not really been there. He had not seen Boba at all, but Boba had recognized him as a Neimoidian. He'd met Neimodians before, on Geonosis.

Still, Libkath had been frightening, at least for the others. Even Boba hadn't been able to look at those weird eyes without getting a queasy feeling. For a moment he couldn't speak. The chamber around him, too, was silent. Then, all at once, the children began babbling and talking.

"No time!" shouted Ygabba. She spun on her heel and headed for a jagged opening that had once housed a power generator. "You heard the Master—we have work to do!"

"But I'm hungry," someone whined.

"Me, too," yelled someone else.

"And me!" piped in another.

Ygabba stopped. Her face looked tired and worn, and much older. "I know," she said. "I'm hungry, too. There will be food vendors outside the arena."

"But we have nothing to trade," said a small Tatooine boy.

A grin spread across Ygabba's face. "That never stopped us before!" she said. The others laughed.

Boba walked up beside her.

"So you're *all* thieves," he said accusingly. He grabbed her arm. "Well, I'm not. I want my things. Give them to me and I'll go."

Ygabba looked him up and down.

"What do you know about us?" she said at last. "You'd steal, too, if you were starving. Many of us have been separated from our families. Others watched as their parents were killed by thugs."

Her brilliant blue eyes stared at him. Boba stared back.

"I saw my father killed, too," he said quietly. "I know what it's like to be alone. I know what it's like not to trust." He shook his head. "But I've never stolen anything in my life. And I won't start now."

The girl looked at him. Her expression softened.

"Your father," she said. "That helmet—it was his?"

Boba nodded.

"And the book?"

"Yes," said Boba.

Ygabba stood there, thinking. Finally she reached into her pocket.

"Here," she said. She handed him his book. "I'm sorry we took it."

Boba slid it into his packet. "What about my helmet?"

"No." She looked behind them, to where the other children milled around. They were waiting for her to lead them out. "What I told you was true. It's safer here. There are many, many thieves in Mos Espa. Bigger ones than us. Scarier ones. I'll give you your helmet back later. I promise."

"That's not good enough. I need it," said Boba. It was not a plea, but a command. "Now."

The girl stared at him for a long time. Finally she nodded.

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"All right," she said. She turned and climbed back onto the shelf and opened the storage compartment. A minute later she returned with the helmet.

"Here," she said.

She held it out to Boba. He grasped it, but her hands did not let go.

"You owe me for this," she said, and drew her hands back.

"Owe you?" said Boba hotly. He clutched the helmet to his chest. "For stealing my helmet?"

"No. For teaching you to be more careful with it."

The girl walked away, gesturing for some of the other children to come with her to find food. Boba watched her, then followed, the helmet still in his hands.

"Maybe you're right," he said grudgingly. "But I'm still not going to become a thief."

Ygabba shrugged. "Suit yourself."

She pushed at a piece of scrap metal that served as a door, and stepped out into an alley choked with garbage. "Sooner or later, people like us end up here with Libkath. There's no place else to go."

Boba followed her outside. "Who is Libkath?" he asked.

"An exiled Neimoidian," said the girl. "At least, I think he's an exile. I'm not sure. The other kids, they don't even wonder who he really is. But I do. All the time. He gives us shelter and food. Not much, but better than nothing. He protects us from the Hutt gangsters. In return we do what he asks."

"Do you ever actually see him?" said Boba. "I mean, the real him, and not just a holo."

"Yes." Ygabba shuddered. "Believe me—the holo is better."

Boba thought of those evil glowing eyes boring into him. "I'll take your word for it. What about those?"

He pointed to her hand. Ygabba lifted it, opening her palm so that he could see the lidless eye in its center. "It's a tracer orb," she explained. "Advanced nanotechnology and organic matter.



When the Master takes us, he has a med droid implant these in our hands.”

“Does he watch everything you do with them?”

“No. They’re monitors, that’s all. If we leave the planet, they’re programmed to release a toxin into our bloodstream.”

“That’s awful!”

“I know. That’s why we listen to him. That’s why we do what he asks. We have no choice.”

Boba listened thoughtfully. “Do you ever really see him?” he asked. “Or does he only communicate like that?”

“Oh, we see him, all right. Him and his battle droids,” said Ygabba grimly. “Whenever we perform a mission. He has us do his dirty work—stealing weapons, or crystal fuel, or water. Sometimes he has us hide things for him. Then he comes back here and collects the goods. He takes them away and sells them.”

Boba nodded. “I get it,” he said. “He’s smuggling weapons!”

Ygabba shrugged. “I guess so. All I know is that he takes whatever we steal for him. He gets the fortune, and we get scraps. If we’re lucky.”

“Does he work alone?”

“No,” said Ygabba. “He has soldiers. Mercenaries. And droids.”

She began to walk down the alley. She picked her way carefully among dead weeds and heaps of burned-out circuitry. Boba stayed at her side. He didn’t put the helmet on yet. He had a feeling that he might attract more attention if he did.

A Mandalorian warrior, followed by a bunch of ragged children?

The thought made him smile a little. It also made him sad.

*If I was a real warrior, I would free them, he thought. I’d bring them back to their families and make sure the Master paid for this!*

Behind him trailed the children. They pushed at one another, laughing and talking quietly.

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Now and then one of them would stop and poke at a heap of rubbish. Once Boba looked back. He saw a boy pull something long and squirming from the ground and pop it into his mouth.

After that, Boba kept his eyes straight ahead.

“Can I ask what you’re doing here on Tatooine?” Ygabba asked after they had been walking for a while.

Boba hesitated. “I’m here to find Jabba the Hutt,” he said at last.

“Jabba?” Ygabba’s blue eyes widened. “You’ve got a long way to go, then. His palace is at the edge of the Western Dune Sea. That’s hundreds of klics from here.”

Boba felt a pang of dismay. “Then I’ll just have to find a way across the Dune Sea,” he said.

“Wait.” Ygabba stopped. She put a hand on his arm. “Let me think.”

Her brow furrowed. After a second she nodded excitedly. “Yes! I bet I’m right!”

“What?” asked Boba. “Tell me!”

She began walking faster. “There are night Podraces this evening—they’re being sponsored by Jabba,” she said. “And this shipment of weapons that we’re supposed to go after—it’s probably for Jabba, too. I’ll bet you dinner at KiLargo’s Cantina that Jabba will be at the arena.”

She snapped her fingers, laughing.

Boba looked at her doubtfully. “Are you sure? How do you know all this stuff?”

“It’s my job to know. You’d be surprised what people will say in front of someone our age.”

Boba nodded. He thought of how stupid grown-ups could be, and how oblivious they were of what kids really knew.

Ahead of them the alley branched into a wide street. On the far side of the street loomed an immense structure.

The Arena Citadel. It was big enough to be a mountain, though Boba had never seen a mountain so alive. Throngs of beings were everywhere, along with carts and speeders and

swoopbikes, braying banthas and armed guards, who shouted at people to keep moving.

"The main gate's there," said Ygabba." And the northwest gate is that way."

She pointed to the far side of the arena. "But if you want to find Jabba the Hutt, your best bet would be around back, at the southeast gate. That's where the aristos go."

Boba frowned. "Aristos?"

"You know—rich people. The Hutts have their own private entrance. Their own private box. Of course, I have no idea how you'll get in," she added loftily.

Boba scowled. Then, unexpectedly, he laughed. "Me neither."

Ygabba smiled. The other children crowded behind them, laughing excitedly and hushing one another.

"I have to leave you now," Ygabba said.

She gestured at the children. They nodded. Then, breaking into groups of twos and threes, they ran across the crowded street. In seconds they had all disappeared, like ants into an ant hill.

Only Boba and Ygabba remained.

"Well," Ygabba said. She stuck out a dirty hand.

Boba hesitated. He looked down to see if there was an eye in her palm. There wasn't. He grinned and took her hand.

"Good luck," said Ygabba.

"Thanks," said Boba. "I'll need it."

With a smile, Ygabba turned and began to spring across the road. Halfway across she stopped.

"Hey—I never asked," she called back to him. "What's your name?"

"Boba," he said. "Boba Fett."

"Boba Fett," the girl repeated. She smiled broadly. "That's a name I'll remember!"

"I sure hope so," said Boba. He slipped the helmet over his head and watched as Ygabba was swallowed by the crowd.

## CHAPTER NINE

It was almost dark by the time he found his way to the southeast gate. The arena was vast, nearly a small city in itself. It seemed like Boba was on his own again.

He passed encampments of beggars, and bright-colored tents where gamblers sat and beckoned him to come inside. He saw a troop of fire-talkers, and a trio of Gamorrean guards who took turns bashing each other with a club. Weather-beaten water prospectors pushed their way to the arena, eager to gamble away what little wealth they had. Vendors sold water in small containers.

“Only ten dataries!” one called to Boba. “Cheapest price at the arena!”

“No thanks,” muttered Boba. His tongue felt like a rock in his mouth, swollen and dry.

He’d better earn some credits soon. *Really* soon.

Overhead floated yellow balloon cameras. They would broadcast tonight’s race to those who could not afford to watch it in person.

*Like me*, thought Boba.

But he didn’t waste time thinking about that. He had a more important mission.

Find Jabba.

He kept walking. Beneath the northwest gate, there was a squadron of heavily armed droids. They were guarding a huge mobile warehouse. Boba wondered if this could be the weapons shipment Libkath had mentioned. If it was, how could a bunch of starved kids ever hope to steal its contents?

*Well*, he thought, *hunger is a good motivator. Just like thirst.*

His own stomach growled. Boba tried not to think about food. He hurried past the droids.

Overhead, the sky was quickly growing dark, swirled with purple and deep blue. Tatooine's twin suns hung low upon the horizon, an angry red. They reminded Boba of Master Libkath's eyes.

There were other eyes watching him, too. Beggars and aliens selling smuggled goods—crystals from k'Farri, Magravian cat-spice, cheap generators. Boba knew better than to listen to their harsh voices, or to those who tried to lure him into the gambling tents.

"Authorized Hutt crediteers! High stakes only!"

Boba stopped. He turned and saw a very large dome-shaped tent. It could easily have hidden *Slave I*, and another ship besides. As Boba watched, its door flap opened to let someone out. A cold, white burst of cloud followed. Boba took a step closer, enjoying the feel of the chill air against his skin.

"You!"

A tall, thin Etti towered above him. He was expensively dressed, and clutched a handful of blinking chips.

"No beggars here!" he said, and lashed out at Boba.

"I'm not a beggar," Boba said angrily, turning.

"No?" The Etti gamemaster looked down at him. He took note of the Mandalorian helmet. "No, I suppose not."

He gave Boba a mirthless smile. From the domed tent behind him came the sounds of deep, unsettling laughter. "But you're still not wanted here. Kurjj, get rid of this creature! Whoever he is. Bib Fortuna informs me that the chief wishes to observe the

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paces from here this evening. He wishes *privacy*,” the Etti hissed, staring at Boba.

A hulking Drovian guard stepped out of the dome.

Boba swallowed, but stood his ground. “I’m looking for someone,” he said.

The Drovian’s huge hand reached for him. Still Boba did not flinch. The Etti stared. His cold smile grew wider. He watched as the Drovian started to grasp Boba’s shoulder.

“Wait.” The Etti raised his long thin arm. The Drovian guard grew still. The gambling master turned and fixed his glittering eyes on Boba.

“Were you sent by someone?” he asked slyly. He slid the chips into a pocket of his robe and rubbed his twiglike hands together. “Your employer has business with me, perhaps?”

Boba shook his head. “No,” he said. His heart was pounding, but he was not afraid. “I represent myself alone.”

“Indeed. And you are looking for...?”

Boba took a deep breath. “I have business with Jabba the Hutt.”

“Really?” The Etti’s thin eyes creased with amusement. His voice rose, and he held open the tent flap behind him. “And what would a Mandalorian want with Jabba the Hutt?”

“That’s my business,” said Boba defiantly. He turned and started to walk away.

“HO HO HO!”

From the tent echoed a low, booming laugh, so deep it seemed to make the ground shake beneath Boba’s feet. “Business! I am always ready to do business—for a price! Bring him in, Kurjij!” a voice called in Huttese, which Boba could understand.

Boba froze.

That voice could belong to only one being on Tatooine. One being in the entire galaxy.

“He says he has business with Jabba the Hutt?” the voice roared. “Well then, it’s time we met!”

## CHAPTER TEN

With a nasty smile, the Etti held the tent flap open. The Drovian pushed Boba roughly inside.

Boba looked up.

*Uhp*, he thought. *This looks bad.*

He had never been more grateful for his father's battle helmet. He only prayed that the thing before him couldn't see him inside it.

When Boba first met Count Dooku, he thought the tall, elegant man was a sinister, but not truly frightening. As for Aurra Sing—she was powerful and cunning, and absolutely ruthless.

But she was a bounty hunter, like Boba. He could understand how she thought. He could understand how she would react, and sometimes even predict it.

But this—*thing*—in front of him almost defied understanding.

Part of it was simply huge he was. Back on Aargau, Boba had glimpsed Jabba's nephew, Gorga the Hutt. Gorga had been big and disgusting.

But he was nothing compared to his uncle Jabba.

Jabba wasn't merely big. He was immense.

And he was hideous.

His mounded, sluglike form nearly filled the great dome of the tent. He reclined on a wide raised platform covered with

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beautiful handwoven rugs and tapestries, all coated with thick slime.

Jabba's followers occupied every remaining bit of space. Some of them were watching a Podrace on a large viewscreen. Others were hunched over gambling tables. Still others sat silently, moving chips and jewels back and forth in complex games of chance. Boba counted numerous guards, Drovians as well as the hulking Gamorrean guards preferred by the Hutt clan.

In addition to security, there was a large group of entertainers and athletes—jugglers, dancers, Podracers, acrobats—as well as Jabba's "pets." These were creatures nearly as ugly and threatening as the great Hutt himself. Most of them were in cages that hung from the domed ceiling. Boba nervously eyed a dwarf vornskr crouched near the entry, its whiplike tail lashing and its razor teeth exposed in a wicked grin.

The miniature vornskr snarled menacingly. Boba took this as his cue to introduce himself.

He said, in Huttese, "Jabba—er, sir. I am an emissary from Jango Fett."

Atop his mound of swollen flesh, Jabba's huge head slowly turned. He regarded Boba coolly with almond-shaped, amber eyes. His froglike tongue flicked in and out of a lipless mouth.

*I bet there are planets smaller than he is*, Boba thought. He forced himself to stare brazenly at the looming crime lord.

"Well, well" Jabba rumbled. He gazed down at Boba with amused disdain. "What have we here? Another volunteer for the races tonight? I don't need another pilot. Not unless one of them dies on the finish line. HO! HO! HO!"

His body shook with laughter. Jabba's lackeys laughed, too. Boba thought their amusement sounded much more forced than the Hutt's.

"I'm not here for the race," Boba said. From inside his helmet, he saw several gamblers glance up from their tables. "I have come—"

He hesitated.



*Why had he come?*

*For knowledge you must find Jabba.*

Well, he'd certainly found Jabba! Boba looked up to see those evil narrow eyes staring at him.

"I—I have come to offer my services to you, O Great One," said Boba.

Peals of laughter shook the dome. Even the vornskr howled gleefully. Only Jabba continued to gaze at Boba, and said nothing.

"His services!" roared a Noghri pilot.

A lithe Carratosian pirate eyed Boba and snickered.

"Maybe he can clean up after the vornskr," she suggested.

Boba clenched his fists as the Gamorrean boars punched each other and guffawed.

"SILENCE!" thundered Jabba.

Immediately the dome grew still. Boba could no longer hear the click of gaming pieces; nothing but his own breath moving in and out of the helmet.

One of Jabba's too-small arms punched at the air. "What is so amusing?" he boomed in Huttese. "Who feels his own services are so important? YOU?"

Jabba turned and stared at the Carratosian. His long pale tongue oozed from his mouth. "Perhaps YOU are disposable, eh?"

"N-no sir," she stammered. "I only meant—"

Without warning, Jabba's powerful tail slashed across the floor. It struck her and she went sprawling.

"Insolent!" he cried. He turned to stare once more at Boba. "You, too, are insolent! No one approaches me without proper introduction."

"I didn't know," Boba said. "I—"

"Ignorance is no excuse!" roared Jabba. "And the penalty for ignorance is—death!"

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

*Death.*

Boba thought fast. Then he spoke fast.

“Jabba—Mightiest of Hutts!” he cried. He was careful to face Jabba directly, and to show no fear.

“It is precisely my ignorance that has brought me here!” Boba continued. “ ‘For knowledge you must seek out Jabba the Hutt’—that is what Jango Fett told me. That is why I have come to you.”

Jabba stared at him. “For knowledge, eh?”

He sounded pleased. Boba drew a breath of relief.

“Do you hear that?” Jabba boomed, turning to his army of lackeys. “This stranger has come to me for knowledge! For this he has risked death, torture, and enslavement!”

*Uh-oh*, thought Boba.

Jabba turned back at him. “Well, intruder! You have come for a good reason. I know very much!”

The sluglike Hutt glanced at the monitor showing a Podrace. He gave a long, rumbling laugh. “Some might say I know what will happen *before* it happens.”

Uneasy laughter rang out from the others in the room. Jabba leaned forward, peering at Boba with cunning eyes.

“You say that Jango Fett sent you? I had heard that he was dead. Killed by the Jedi on Geonosis. Is this true?”

Once again Boba was glad the helmet hid his face.

“Yes,” he said. The word came out almost as a gasp. “Yes, it is true.”

“I know of Jango’s skill. He was courageous, and a man of his word. He was one of the finest bounty hunters in the galaxy.”

“Some might say the very finest,” interjected Boba without thinking

“Hmmm.” Jabba’s eyes narrowed. “You, too, Mandalorian intruder, seem to have courage. But you have broken a rule by coming here. So I will give you a choice.”

Jabba’s flabby arm gestured at the viewscreen. Nearly everyone inside the dome was now clustered in front of it, eagerly watching a Podrace. “Tell me who you think will win this race. If you are correct, I will take you with me to my B’omarrian Palace. There you will serve me.”

Boba nodded. “Thank you,” he began, but Jabba raised a hand to cut him off.

“If you are wrong, you will still accompany me to my palace—but you will not serve me. Instead you will be *served*—to one of my pit beasts!”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Boba turned to stare at the monitor. Numbers and words scrolled across the bottom of the viewscreen. Statistics, the names of this evening's Podracers, their homeworlds, and racing class. Then the image changed. Boba saw the inside of the huge arena, packed with shouting, cheering, waving viewers.

*I wonder if Ygabba's in there somewhere,* Boba thought. *I wonder if she ever found the weapons shipment.*

But he couldn't wonder for long.

"Three more minutes!" shouted Estral, the gamemaster. "All bets must be in!"

Sleek machines flashed across the viewscreen—the Podracers. Boba watched them eagerly.

*Man, I'd love to get my hands on one of those!*

High-combustion engines made it possible for the Podracers to reach speeds of eight hundred kilometers an hour. Pit droids scrambled around the vehicles. They adjusted fuel levels and made last-minute repairs. Boba would have been glad to pilot any one of the racers—but which one was going to win tonight?

"Two more minutes!" cried the Etti.

Boba angled closer to the viewscreen. Now it showed profiles of the various racers. Boba recognized a few of them—the dinosaurian Chros-filik of Phu; Gasgano; Ody Mandrell;

LobwuWa Loba, a thuggish Aqualish who seemed to be a local favorite; the eager young Aleena, Mab Kador, in his retrofitted *White Panther*.

But there were others, too, names and faces Boba had never seen before. How could he possibly choose the one who would beat the rest? Humans and aliens alike were massed inside the arena, making bets. Many of them would lose their life fortunes before the night was through. A few would probably lose their lives.

Boba didn't want to be one of them.

Despite the cool air inside the dome, a trickle of sweat began to inch down Boba's neck. His shoulder hurt where the helmet chafed his skin. He rubbed it gingerly, thinking hard. Jabba's guests crowded around the Etti gamemaster, shoving credits into his long thin hands.

"One minute!" he cried.

From the corner of his eye, Boba saw Jabba watching him. Quickly the young bounty hunter looked back at the viewscreen.

The statistics showed that Mab Kador had been undefeated for the last three races. *He looks young and hungry*, Boba thought, *and he has a great Podracer. That's who I'd back. That's who I'd want to win.*

But was that who Jabba was backing in the race? Boba had heard that the criminal overlord controlled everything on Tatooine, from blaster smuggling to the import of illegal spices. Every gambling den was under Hutt supervision. Every petty criminal paid tribute to Jabba. So did every rising crime lord. Those who grew too ambitious, those who tried to double-cross Jabba, were sought out by bounty hunters and brought to Jabba's palace.

Even on remote Kamino, Boba had heard horrible stories of what happened inside the fortress of Jabba the Hutt. He had never thought he might see it for himself.

"Twenty seconds!"

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Boba swallowed. His hand slid into his pocket and touched his father's book. He didn't dare take it out, but just feeling it reassured him a little.

*For knowledge you must find Jabba. He will not give it; you must take it.*

"Time's up!"

Boba let his breath out. When he lifted his head, he saw Jabba gazing at him with those wicked, serpentlike eyes.

"So, young Mandalorian! Have you made your choice?"

Everyone inside the dome crowded in front of the viewscreen—everyone except for Boba and Jabba the Hutt. The gangster's pale tongue flicked from his mouth. He reached into a large basket overflowing with Ylesian white worms, grabbed a handful of squirming grubs, and shoved them into his mouth. Boba felt sick. From the viewscreen came the roar of the arena's crowd as the signal was given.

The race had started.

"Tell me—now!" roared Jabba. "You said you came to me for knowledge? You must show that you yourself possess it! *Who will be the winner?*"

Boba stared at the crime lord.

*He will not give it; you must take it.*

And suddenly, he knew the right answer.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Well?” demanded Jabba.

Fearlessly, Boba looked at him. “O wisest of Hutts! The winner will be—whoever you want it to be!”

Inside the dome everything abruptly grew silent, except for the muted viewscreen. From outside, Boba could hear a wave of sound, shouts, and cheers echoing from the arena. There was the muffled explosion of a blaster. On his raised throne, Jabba stared down at Boba Fett. Very slowly he raised his flabby arms. His eyes narrowed. His entire vast body began to shake. His long, fat tail rippled and coiled like a dying slug.

Jabba the Hutt was laughing.

“HO HO!” The entire dome shook as he bellowed and roared. “Well said, young warrior!” He grabbed another fistful of worms and crammed them into his mouth, without ceasing to speak. “A clever answer! And a true one!”

Inside his helmet, Boba sighed with relief.

“Thank you, O Great and Wise Hutt,” he said. He tipped his head respectfully. It was a good thing Jabba couldn’t see his face! “I am overwhelmed.”

*Overwhelmed with disgust*, Boba added to himself.

“Estral!” boomed Jabba. His flailing arm beckoned to the Etti gamemaster. “Collect their credits! We’re leaving!”

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Boba looked around, confused.

“But the race isn’t over,” he blurted.

Once more Jabba heaved with laughter. “I know who will win. I have more important business to attend to.”

He leaned forward, staring intently at Boba. “Young Mandalorian! You said you were sent by Jango Fett.”

Boba nodded. “That’s right.”

“So you, too, are a bounty hunter?”

Boba’s voice was loud and clear. “Yes. I am.”

“That is good. I am always in need of bounty hunters—even small ones. You will come with me to my palace. My major-domo, Bib Fortuna, will arrange for you to be outfitted there. Until you have discharged your debt to me, you will be under my command.”

“My debt to you?” Boba said. He couldn’t keep outrage from his voice. “What do I owe you for?”

Immediately he felt the hot breath of the Drovian guard upon his neck.

“You will die for that,” the Drovian grunted.

He drew a curved litch-knife from his belt and held it just inches from Boba’s face.

“And,” the Drovian added with a twisted smile, “you will die slowly.”



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Boba had no time to think. He acted.

Without a sound he leaped to one side. The Drovian's knife whistled harmlessly through the air where, a nanosecond before, Boba had been.

"Huh?" gaped the hulking alien.

A small table stood near the viewscreen. Boba grabbed the table and swung it front of him, fending off the Drovian's blade. Jabba's guests yelled and scattered in all directions. Jabba himself watched, laughing coarsely.

"You will pay for this!" croaked the Drovian.

As the guard bore down on him, Boba thrust the table upward. The knife stuck on the wood surface. While the Drovian struggled to free his weapon, Boba pushed the table up farther. Then he darted sideways, kicking at the lumbering guard's knees. With a groaning thud, the Drovian stumbled and fell. Jabba's guests laughed as Boba turned to breathlessly face Jabba.

"I am no one's slave or servant!" Boba said. "I will work for you, for a price—but I will name that price!"

Jabba's laughter stilled. He gazed at Boba. After a moment he nodded. "You are my kind of scum! You will make a good hunter."

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The protection of his helmet made Boba feel bold. “Who’s to say I’m not one already?”

Jabba smiled slyly. “Soon you will have the chance to prove it. I have a job that needs to be executed. I have already contacted another hunter, but perhaps the assignment should be yours.”

Jabba turned and gave a disdainful glance at the Drovian. “Bring him back to the palace,” he ordered his guards. “Once we have arrived, put him in the holding pen.”

The Drovian roared and fought furiously as the Gamorreans grabbed him and led him away.

Boba watched them go. He had never imagined it would be possible to feel pity for a Drovian. Still, the thought of Jabba’s pit beasts made him hope that the gangster might change his mind.

“Estral!” boomed Jabba. “I have commanded Bib Fortuna to ready the sail barge for our departure. We leave immediately. Ensure that this dome is dismantled. And see that our new recruit is not left behind.”

“Yes, m’lord,” replied the Etti.

He turned and looked at Boba. It was obvious that he was not impressed by what he saw. “The sail barge will be here in a few minutes. You can park your speeder in the holding area. Food will be served on the main deck after departure.”

Boba said, “I have no speeder.”

“A bounty hunter without a vehicle?” asked Estral with contempt.

“My ship’s being overhauled,” Boba added quickly. “It’s in Mentis Qinx’s docking bay.”

Estral fixed him with a cold smile. “Qinx extends much credit to those in need. In exchange he demands huge fees. Many find they are unable to pay, and he keeps their vessels. Jabba the Hutt will own you before you get your ship back.”

“We’ll see about that,” snapped Boba.

But behind the helmet, his face fell. Being a bounty hunter meant having the freedom to live and travel where he wanted to, when he wanted to.

He did not want to have to answer to Jabba the Hutt forever.

He did not want to answer to anyone but himself.

Still, Estral was right. Boba needed credits to pay for the repairs and refueling of *Slave I*. Jabba had said he needed bounty hunters. He said he had a job that needed to be executed. If Boba did that job, he could demand enough credits—and more—to reclaim his ship. He could set out on his own then, and go anywhere in the galaxy.

He would be free.

Even better.

At long last, he would be a bounty hunter.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Months before, Boba had been on the Republic Troopship *Candaserri*, a ship so big it was almost like a small planet.

Jabba the Hutt's sail barge was not that big, but it was big enough. Looking at it made Boba feel as though he was gazing at a small city within a city. A world within a world.

It was dark now, but there were enough bright lights around the arena to throw shadows everywhere. After Jabba was escorted from the dome, Boba and the rest went outside. The barge hovered above the ground. Bib Fortuna, Jabba's major-domo, commanded gangplanks and the ladders to be deployed. Slaves and servants ran up and down, readying the barge for departure.

"Hurry!" hissed Fortuna.

Once Jabba was aboard, he would be impatient to leave. It was not a good idea to make him wait!

Boba wandered a few meters away from the barge. He'd sneaked a sip of water to drink inside the dome, and a few dried ninchifs, tiny cavefish no bigger than his fingernail. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a full meal.

He pushed that thought aside and crouched on the ground. There he watched Jabba's servants deflate the portable dome, like a great balloon.

It took only minutes. More servants scurried down from the sail barge, gathering the dome's contents. Gambling equipment and furniture was carted off. It would be stored in the vessel's cargo bays during the journey to Jabba's palace.

Jabba's palace. Boba had heard rumors about that place.

What he heard wasn't good. Not at all.

And now that he'd seen Jabba in the flesh, Boba was pretty sure the palace would be even worse than the rumors. He had better be ready for anything.

He leaned back and adjusted his helmet. He switched on the infrared vision feature. Immediately everything around him was shrouded in black and red.

"Ugh!" said Boba, grimacing.

Now he could see all of Tatooine's nighttime vermin. Sandrats scurried everywhere, feeding on trash left by arena goers. Sandscorpions scuttled from rock to rock, their pincers held high.

Boba saw several small figures creep from the shadows, unheeded. They snatched a metal crate and were gone in an instant.

*Libkath's army at work*, he thought with grudging respect.

"You look pretty happy," a low voice said behind him.

Boba whirled. "Ygabba!"

Behind him stood a slender figure clad in rags. "Got it in one," she said, and smiled. With one dirty hand she touched the edge of his helmet. "Huh. I think I liked you better without that. Aren't you hot in there?"

"Yeah. And thirsty."

Ygabba moved to crouch beside him. "Well, I can help you with that, at least. Here—"

She held out a small container of water. Boba looked at her, then took it gratefully. He glanced around to make sure no one else was watching. Then he pushed up his helmet and gulped the water.

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It smelled strongly of dust and purification chemicals. There were bits of grit and sand in it. It was way too warm.

It was the best water he had ever tasted.

“Thank you,” he said when the last drop was gone. He handed the container back to her, and lowered his helmet’s visor. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

She nodded. “We did. All those droids guarding that tank back there? That was just a decoy. The real shipment was hidden with a shipment of water from a moisture farm near Bestine. That’s where this came from,” she added, holding up the empty container. “To tell you the truth, I’d rather have taken the water.”

“But you got the weapons?”

Ygabba smiled. “Of course.” Then her smile faded. “We have no choice. If we don’t do as Libkath orders, bad things happen.”

“What kind of bad things?”

“Kids disappear. We never see them again. Libkath sells them as slaves or indentured servants. Or worse.”

Her expression darkened. Boba thought of how bad off Ygabba and the others seemed now. If something was worse than that, it must be really, *really* bad.

“Where do the weapons go?” he asked.

Ygabba shrugged. “Smuggling is big business on Tatooine. Some people say it’s the only business. There are a lot of people who want weapons.”

Boba thought for a moment. “So you’re saying these weapons were smuggled here in the first place. Now Libkath is double-crossing whoever smuggled them in, by stealing them?”

“That’s right. And the only reason he gets away with it is that no one suspects us. Like I said before. Grown-ups never take us seriously. Until they catch us.”

Suddenly she got up. “Well, I better get going. I have to meet the others.”

Boba said, “Ygabba, wait.”

She stopped. “What?”

“Why don’t you just escape? I mean, Tatooine is a big planet. Libkath couldn’t track you all down if you all ran away. And you said the toxin wouldn’t be released unless you left the planet.”

“True.” She shook her head sadly. “But the little ones are too small. They could never keep up with the rest of us.”

“But you could go for help,” said Boba. “Someone would have to listen. Someone would have to help.”

Ygabba’s eyes brimmed with tears. “We have no families, and for those of us who still have relatives, he threatens to kill them if we ever go home. Life is hard enough for them here on Tatooine. We can survive in Mos Espa. Someday, when we’re older, we will find our way back home. I don’t know how. But we will.”

Boba stared at her. He nodded. “I think you’re brave, Ygabba. If there’s some way I can help you and the others, I will.”

Ygabba looked at him. She smiled. “Thanks, Boba.”

She glanced up at the sail barge. Its banners were being unfurled. The air sailing crew was pulling up lines and getting ready to leave.

“Looks like you found what you were looking for, too,” she said.

Boba stood beside her. “Yes. Jabba agreed to take me on—as a bounty hunter!”

He couldn’t keep the pride from his voice.

Ygabba looked at him. Slowly, she smiled. “Boba Fett, bounty hunter! I definitely won’t forget that.”

“No. And I won’t forget all of you, either.”

From the sail barge came the fanfare of a trumpet. Jabba the Hutt was ready to depart.

“Good-bye, Ygabba!” Boba called as he ran to the barge. He grabbed a rope ladder and quickly climbed it, swinging himself on board. Rough hands grabbed him and pushed him onto the deck.

“Get below!” a Gamorrean guard shouted at him. “No riffraff where Jabba can see you!”

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“I’ve been invited by Jabba,” Boba protested. “As a bounty hunter—”

Harsh laughter came from the guard. “Get below with the other hired guns!” he brayed, and shoved Boba toward a door.

“You—!” Boba started to shout. Then he thought better of it. He gave one last look out toward the arena. A small figure stood where the dome had been, watching him.

“Go’wan!”

A huge gnarled hand shoved Boba through the door into the darkness of Jabba’s barge.



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

On the upper deck, Jabba and his invited guests drank and ate. Music played. Acrobats tumbled and Twi'lek dancers leaped and turned. The barge's sails filled with air, as the great vessel came about and sailed majestically above the ground, heading for the Western Dune Sea. Overhead, stars burned through a sky black as Hapes velvet. The air smelled of roasting meat, of sweet, cool fruit sherbets, of flowers imported at fabulous expense from distant green worlds. A Mrlssi harpist played and sang while Jabba sat on his throne and crammed handfuls of writhing worms into his mouth. Jabba's guests wandered across the deck. They gazed out at the starlit desert beneath them, laughing and scheming and drinking Jabba's fine Chandrilan wines.

Unfortunately, Boba had only a glimpse of all of this splendor. He could only hear the music and merriment, and smell the mouth-watering odors of rare meats and fruits.

He was in the hold, beneath the upper deck. There were no stars here to light the darkness. The space was dimly lit by swaying light globes suspended from the ceiling. There was no food or water. The air was close and hot, and stank of dirty straw and penned beasts. Off-duty crew members milled about, cursing and gambling away their pay. Some slept in hammocks slung

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along the walls. A few amused themselves by poking sticks into cages that held new pit beasts bound for Jabba's palace.

Boba picked his way carefully through the crowded space. He paused to look into a cage holding a Gallion tripion. The immense scorpionlike creature clashed its claws. Its poison-tipped tail clattered against the bars of its cage as a guard poked his sword through the slats.

"You'll be fed soon enough!" he sneered as his comrades laughed.

One of them looked at Boba. "Another newcomer?" His face creased in a leering smile. "That'll be the third bounty hunter this month that Jabba's set after Gilramos!"

"Gilramos?" asked Boba.

"That's right! A regular thorn in Jabba's tail, that one is. And a hard thorn to dislodge. He killed the last two bounty hunters who came looking for him."

The guard looked Boba up and down. He laughed derisively. "Looks like you'll make it three," he said, and turned back to tormenting the tripion.

"Third time's the charm," Boba muttered. He crossed over to the wall, trying to keep his balance. The air barge moved swiftly—they would reach the palace by morning, he'd heard someone say.

But the air yacht didn't always move smoothly. Sometimes it would fall with a sickening jerk. Other times it would abruptly soar straight up, hundreds of meters into the air. When this happened, Boba was glad he couldn't see outside. He was also glad he hadn't eaten much. He would hate to get airsick!

"So you're another bounty hunter," someone announced. "Jabba must really be getting desperate."

A wizened old man approached Boba, who was not much shorter than he was. The old man wore a flowing green robe, covered with a long, stained apron. His sparse white hair was almost hidden beneath a white cap. His face was brown and wrinkled as a dried gorapple, but his blue eyes were kind.

“Ye-es,” said Boba. He stared at the man distrustfully. “I was sent here by Jango Fett.”

The man’s eyes widened. “Jango Fett? I would keep that information private, if I were you. Durge will not be happy to hear it!”

Boba’s stomach fell. “Durge?”

The man shook his head. “No more chatter—first things first. Who are you?”

Boba stiffened. He said nothing. After a moment the man extended his hand. He pointed to an alcove where a narrow berth had been carved into the wall.

“Come,” he said kindly. “It is a long journey to Jabba’s fortress. Not everyone in Jabba’s employ is as unpleasant as these individuals—”

He gestured at the Gamorreans, now busy playing a game with knives.

“Most, perhaps,” the old man added, “but not all. For example, me. My name is Gab’borah Hise. I am the dessert chef assigned to this sail barge.”

Boba grinned. “There are others?”

“Oh, yes—many. Dozens of dessert chefs alone! Jabba may dine upon those disgusting white worms, but his guests and his legion of gangsters have varied appetites. Their taste has become as depraved as Jabba’s own, however. I must constantly think of new ways of tempting them with food.”

Boba followed him to the alcove and sat down. Gab’borah sighed, smoothing the front of his apron.

“I did not always work for Jabba. Once, I was the head cook at a cantina in Mos Eisley. I was very successful. *Too* successful. Jabba heard how good I was. He made me an offer I could not refuse.”

Boba smiled. “I understand. You had no choice but to come here.”

“I had no choice,” agreed the old man. “Once I cooked for smugglers and merchants. Now I cook for smugglers and

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gangsters. Earlier this evening I was preparing a most elegant confection. Stewed, flaming collypods with tangerette cream and figs. Absolutely delicious! Unfortunately, I served a sample to Bib Fortuna. One of the collypods, though in flames, was not quite dead. It burned his sleeve. Fortunately, I was able to put the flames out. Then I bribed Fortuna with a month's worth of wealth. I also gave him a Ziziibbon truffle, freshly made this morning. Bib Fortuna is quite fond of them."

Gab'borah shrugged. "So he did not throw me into a Sarlacc pit, as he would surely have done otherwise. But that is how I have come to be sent down here, in disgrace."

He slid a wrinkled hand into the pocket of his robe and withdrew a small, round object. It was bright green, threaded with red and yellow.

"Here." He held it out to Boba. "I saved this one. Don't worry, it's not poisoned," he said, and to prove it, took a little bite. "See? Try it. Tell me what you think."

Boba looked at it warily. Then he turned aside, lifting his helmet a scant inch so that he could pop the truffle into his mouth.

It smelled delicious.

It *was* delicious.

"That's great!" Boba said thickly through a mouthful.

Gab'borah nodded. "I know. In all the galaxy, I alone have the recipe—another reason Bib Fortuna will never let me come to serious harm."

"Only you?" Boba licked his lips, savoring the last bit of sweetness.

"Yes." Gab'borah turned away. His withered face grew sad. "I was going to leave the secret with my only child and heir, but..."

His voice trailed off. In one of the cages, a vrbllther gave its weird yodeling roar. Boba rubbed his eyes. It was late. He needed to sleep. But first he had a question for Gab'borah.

"You mentioned a name before. Durge." Boba made his voice sound casual. "Is he here?"

“Durge?” The old man suppressed a shudder. “A bounty hunter of terrible strength and destructive power.”

He reached to touch Boba’s helmet. “You should be very wary of him. Durge hates Mandalorians almost as much as he hates the Jedi. His body armor is tattooed with the symbols of Mandalorians he has slain.”

“Now I remember,” said Boba, pretending this was all new to him. He felt a chill, despite the hold’s hot, musty air. “He wanted to be the source for the clone army.”

Gab’borah looked at Boba with respect. “That is the rumor,” he said. “How is it you come to know this?”

Boba hesitated. Then he said, “Jango Fett told me.”

Gab’borah’s eyes grew keen. “Then you know that Durge rejoiced when Jango Fett was killed. His only regret was that he was not the one to deal Jango Fett his death blow.”

“Yes,” Boba said. His eyes watered. He fought to keep his voice steady. “I know.”

“You must also know then that your life will be in danger if Durge sees you.”

“I have been hired by Jabba the Hutt to be his bounty hunter,” Boba answered fiercely. “I am under his protection!”

Gab’borah shook his head. “Jabba has also hired Durge as his bounty hunter.”

The chef grasped the side of the berth and stared out at the crowded, stuffy hold. The Gamorrean guards were sprawled on the floor or swung in hammocks, snoring loudly. Two stood as sentries by the ladder that led to the upper deck. Gab’borah looked at them, then turned back to Boba.

“Ah, young warrior,” he said. “When it comes to Jabba the Hutt, there is no protection. There is no safety. There is only cunning and strength, if you are very, very lucky. And if you are not? Then there is only torment.”

The old man stepped from the berth. He crawled into a hammock hanging beside it.

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“We will be at the palace before many more hours have passed,” he told Boba. “My advice to you now is to sleep. It is hard to be either cunning or strong if one is not well-rested.”

Sleep! Boba stared at Gab’borah in disbelief. How could anyone sleep in a stinking, crowded place like this?

But in a few minutes, he found he was taking Gab’borah’s advice.

It had been a very, very long day. At last, Boba slept.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Boba woke to a low growling sound. When he opened his eyes, he saw the vrb'lther staring hungrily at him from inside its cage. Its green eyes glowed balefully. Its long yellow teeth showed between black gums. Boba hastily sat up in his berth. The vrb'lther's mouth opened in a grin as it lowered its head back onto its claws.

Now what? Boba looked around. The hold was quiet, except for the snores of the Gamorrean guards on the floor. Beside the ladder, the two sentries sat with their heads bowed.

*Sleeping on the job! I bet Jabba wouldn't like that,* thought Boba.

He glanced to where Gab'borah hung in his hammock, breathing heavily. Then Boba turned sideways in his berth, making sure no one could see him. He lifted his helmet.

Air! He couldn't really call it *fresh* air, but it sure beat breathing through the visor. Boba rubbed his eyes. Grit and sand stuck to his fingers. He wiped them on the tunic. Then he carefully removed his book.

He set it on his knees and opened it. Words glowed on the screen-page: *For knowledge you must find Jabba.*

Boba's finger hovered above the page. He touched a word.

*Jabba.*

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Immediately the sentence faded and another screen appeared. Words filled it. Boba scanned them quickly, until he found what he was looking for.

*Palace.*

“Tell me,” Boba whispered. He pressed the voiceover command. Immediately his father’s voice began speaking to him. The voice was so low he had to strain to hear it.

“Jabba’s palace is built upon what was once a B’omarr monastery. At all costs, avoid the lower levels. That is where the prisons and dungeons are, and the lairs of pit beasts that have escaped over the centuries. The uppermost level is where Jabba’s most valued guests stay—as long as they *are* valued. The average guest ends up as a krayt’s dinner. Or a Sarlaacs’ lunch. Bounty hunters usually fare somewhat better, *if* they are successful.”

The voice faded. Jango Fett’s face filled the screen, staring directly at Boba. “There is one rule, and one rule only, when dealing with Jabba the Hutt,” his father’s image pronounced solemnly. “*Do not fail.*”

“I won’t fail,” murmured Boba. His finger traced the outline of his father’s face. For a second, Jango smiled at his son. Then the image disappeared, and the screen went blank. Boba saw his own reflection then. He didn’t look like his father yet, but he wasn’t the kid he used to be. His eyes had gotten fiercer. His mouth looked unaccustomed to smiling much.

Boba put the book away. He ran a hand through his hair by way of combing it, and stood. Light filtered through cracks in the barge walls. On the deck above he could hear footsteps and the clanging of a bell.

“Wake up, you slobs!” someone bellowed. A Gamorrean’s twisted face appeared at the hatch atop the ladder. “We’ll be docking in fifteen minutes!”

The sleeping guards groaned and grunted. They began stumbling to their feet, kicking at those still dozing on the floor. In his hammock Gab’borah stirred. He yawned, then clambered out, stretching.



“Morning already! I trust you slept soundly?” he asked Boba, and winked.

“Like a baby,” Boba replied.

“That is good. Sleep is important for a warrior. And so is breakfast.”

Gab’borah looked around stealthily. Then he pulled two small packets from his robe.

“Here,” he whispered, giving one to Boba. “Gleb rations. Not as tasty as what you had last night, but it will fill your stomach and give you a day’s worth of nutrients.”

Boba unwrapped the package. Inside was a small flat bar of what looked like cardboard.

He sniffed it.

It smelled like cardboard. He looked curiously at Gab’borah, who was busily munching his rations. Boba shrugged and took a bite of his.

It *tasted* like cardboard, too. But it was better than nothing. Quickly he finished.

Just in time.

“You’re wanted on deck!” A Gamorrean shoved a hairy fist at Gab’borah’s stomach. The old man bowed and started hurrying for the ladder. Boba waited an instant, then started after him.

“Hey! No one said he wanted *you*!”

The beast grabbed Boba by the shoulder. In its cage, the vrbllther let loose a warbling cry.

“He’s getting hungry!” the Gamorrean said, his piggy eyes glinting with malice. “How’s about we give him a little snack!”

Boba struggled against the guard. “I’m here at Jabba’s request!” he shouted. “Let me go, or you’ll pay!”

The guard sneered. “Jabba won’t miss another bounty hunter—he’s lost so many already!”

Boba landed a kick in the Gamorrean’s stomach. With a roar of pain and rage the guard drew back, his fist raised. “Why, you—!”

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"Excuse me." Gab'borah cleared his throat and gave the Gamorrean a cold look. "This warrior is here at Jabba's *special* request. And my own—he is to help prepare Jabba's morning repast."

The guard glared at the old man.

Gab'borah glared back. "I would not like to be the one responsible for making Jabba wait for his breakfast," he said. "Come—"

He beckoned for Boba. With a snarl the Gamorrean watched as Boba hurried to join the ancient chef.

"Are you really making Jabba's breakfast?" he whispered as he clambered up the hatch.

"No." Gab'borah stretched a hand out to pull Boba on deck. "He mostly eats those revolting white worms. And slimy little wuorls. But the Gamorreans are too stupid to remember that."

"Good thing," agreed Boba.

Gab'borah looked at Boba, his expression wistful.

"You are a courageous young man," he said. "And lucky. Many your own age here on Tatooine have disappeared. Kidnapped. Their families never hear from them again. Their fate is lost to us."

The old man's eyes grew sad. Gazing at him, Boba felt sad, too, but also excited.

"I saw them!" he began. "They—"

Before he could continue, the dark-robed figure of Bib Fortuna appeared.

"You!" he ordered in his thin voice. His clawed finger pointed at Gab'borah. "You are to proceed to the kitchens—immediately!"

Gab'borah bowed. "As you wish," he said to Bib Fortuna, then glanced at Boba. "I will proceed to the seventh kitchen," he murmured. "That is my customary place of employment."

Boba looked at him. He understood that this was the old man's way of telling him how he could be found.

“Good-bye,” said Boba. Gab’borah smiled, then walked away. Bib Fortuna turned impatiently.

“And you—” The Twi’lek’s orange eyes fixed on Boba. “*You* are to prepare for an audience with Jabba. Choose your words carefully,” he added, his mouth twisting into a sneer. “They will probably be your last!”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Boba watched as the Twi'lek headed for a raised area of the main deck. A brilliant yellow canopy billowed above it. Beneath the canopy, there was shade. There was shelter from Tatooine's twin suns, already burning fiercely with the dawn. There was a table laid out with food and pitchers of cool water, as valuable as precious metals on this desert planet.

And there was Jabba. He reclined upon a platform, one stubby hand grasping a froglike wuorl. With a groan of pleasure he plopped the wuorl into his mouth. Boba took a deep breath. He adjusted his helmet, then strode over

"O Exalted Hutt," he said. His voice was confident yet respectful. "I await your orders."

Jabba chewed noisily. He swallowed. He belched.

"You say you are a bounty hunter?" he asked.

"Yes, O Mighty Jabba."

Jabba stared at Boba's helmet. Boba felt a trickle of sweat on the back of his neck. He was glad that Jabba could not see his face....

Or could he...?

"You are small for a Mandalorian warrior," Jabba said slowly in Huttese. His eyes narrowed. "I have a task that is dangerous. It demands courage and skill."

"I have both," Boba pronounced.

"Others have said the same." Jabba shook with a spasm of laughter. "Their bones now lie in an acklay's den!"

"Excuse me, Exalted One." Bib Fortuna stepped onto the platform beside the gangster. He lowered his head and announced, "We have arrived at the palace."

Even as he spoke, the smooth motion of the sail barge stopped. Beneath Boba's feet the deck seemed to lurch. He caught his balance in time to keep from falling.

"O Great Jabba," he began. "I would like to—"

"Silence!" roared Jabba. He glared at Boba. "In five minutes I will meet with you and another bounty hunter in my throne room. There I will give you your assignment. If you are late, other arrangements will be made."

The crime lord gave a long, jeering laugh. "These arrangements will involve my combat arachnids. They have not been fed for several days. I find they fight better when they are hungry."

Boba nodded earnestly. "I won't be late," he said.

But Jabba was already leaving.

The deck was in chaos. People hurried to raise and lower ladders and planks. A wide ramp was in place for Jabba's departure.

"Move it!" shouted a guard.

Boba hurried to the rail, shading his eyes from the blazing suns. He stared out. For the first time, he saw Jabba's palace.

"Wow!" he breathed.

Around him stretched the desolation of the Dune Sea. Distant mountains loomed above shifting red sands and deep canyons. Far, far away, tiny black forms moved across the desert—a herd of wild banthas.

Somewhere out there lived the barbarian Sand People, the Tusken Raiders. Somewhere Jawas scavenged space freighters and abandoned moisture farms.

But there were no Sand People here. There were no Jawas.

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This was the stronghold of Jabba the Hutt.

It was a fortress more huge and more strangely beautiful than anything Boba had ever seen. An immense central tower rose from the desert cliffs, as tall as a mountain. Around it, slender spires and mushroom-shaped turrets cast purple shadows on the bright sand. Speeders flashed beneath them, carrying supplies and guests.

"It is impressive, is it not?" a robotic voice remarked.

Boba turned to see a humanoid PD protocol droid beside him. Its yellow plasteel body gleamed in the morning sun.

"Yes, it is," replied Boba. He adjusted his helmet to shade his eyes from the brilliance.

"Long, long ago it was a B'omarr monastery," the droid went on. "There were many thousands of monks here then. Now there are only a few. Their brains have been transferred into spider-droid casings. One can sometimes glimpse them on the upper levels."

Inside his helmet, Boba grimaced. *Ugh!* he thought. *Remind me not to go on the upper levels!*

"Keep moving!" a Gamorrean bellowed.

Boba eased himself toward a crowded ramp. The droid walked beside him. As they jostled their way onto the ramp, a deafening roar blasted through the calm desert air.

"Whoa!" exclaimed Boba. "What's that?"

He looked up. A large speeder thundered past. Blazing vapor trailed behind it. A tall, powerful figure straddled the speeder. Weapons bulged from the shoulders of his armor. Above his huge hands, grenades glittered like crystal eyes.

The speeder raced toward Jabba's citadel. Boba glimpsed the outline of a Mandalorian skull symbol glowing red against silvery armor.

"That is Durge," said the droid. "Jabba heard he was on Tatooine and made him a large offer."

The droid gazed at Boba. Its round eyes were empty of emotion.

“Whoever fails will be given to Durge as a reward,” the droid continued. “That is how he keeps his reflexes keen. He practices upon living prey. That is why he is the greatest bounty hunter here.”

Boba stared back into the droid’s eyes. He shook his head. “Durge is the greatest bounty hunter?” he said, thinking of what his father might say. “Well, I think it’s time for a change!”

Boba’s words sounded braver than he felt. But the droid did not notice.

“Come,” it said. Behind them, Gamorrean guards stood impatiently, their weapons drawn. “I will escort you to the throne room.”

“Thanks,” said Boba. “I’ve never been here before.”

“Do not thank me,” the droid said in its cold, mechanical voice. “I doubt that you will ever come here again.”

Without a word, Boba followed the droid down the ramp and into the shadow of Jabba’s fortress.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

The inside of the palace was dark and cool. Boba breathed deeply in relief.

“Boy, that’s better!” he remarked to the droid.

But his relief did not last long. A large, spider-like form on long metal legs tiptoed past. What looked like its head was actually a clear globe filled with fluid. Inside the fluid floated what looked like a brain.

Boba stared at it. He said, “Is that a monk?”

“No,” said the droid. It began to walk down a dim hall. “That is the last bounty hunter Jabba sent after Gilramos. What remains of him, anyway.”

Boba watched the creature stalk toward the shadows. Then he hurried after the droid. Behind him the click of the spider-droid’s legs faded into silence.

“Why hasn’t anyone been able to capture Gilramos?” he asked.

“Tatooine is a very big planet,” said the droid. “A very desolate planet. There are many places to hide in the desert. One could spend a lifetime searching for an enemy and never find him.”

“Is that where Gilramos is hiding?” asked Boba. “In the desert?”



“So the bounty hunters think. Here—”

The droid stopped. It motioned at a high, carved arch. “This is Jabba’s throne room. I must leave you here.”

It turned and left.

Boba watched it go. His heart felt like a rock in his chest. He looked at the archway.

Once he passed through, he would be at the center of Jabba’s realm.

He would be at Jabba’s mercy.

*No!* he thought. He put his hand into his pocket and touched the book there. Immediately he felt calmer.

*Fear is energy.*

That is what his father had taught him. If you contain your own fear, it becomes power.

And power makes you strong.

Boba drew a deep breath. He felt his heart pounding, but now it did not frighten him. He looked at the arch.

From inside, he could hear music. He could hear voices. He could hear shrill cries and deep, powerful laughter. He could hear a voice dry and merciless as a desert storm.

Jabba.

And Durge.

“Time to go to work,” said Boba.

He walked inside.

The throne room was large. Flickering flames rose and fell inside tall lamps. Shadowy figures danced and leaped. Someone trilled on a flute. Boba could smell smoke.

And roasting food. Near Jabba’s throne a spit turned. On it was a huge demon squid, its tentacles nicely browned. Boba lost his appetite.

“Bounty hunter!” Jabba shouted, a mountainous figure in the center of the room. “Approach!”

Boba stepped forward. “Your Huge Hutttness,” he said. He bowed. “I have come to receive your orders.”

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Boba looked up. On his throne, Jabba reclined. He watched Boba through slitted eyes. Around him, the dancers and singers stopped. They stared at Boba, too. Their eyes were round with fear.

And with anticipation.

“Did I ask you to speak?” roared Jabba. He leaned forward, his shadow falling across Boba.

“N-no,” faltered Boba. “But—”

From Jabba’s shadow another figure emerged. Huge and muscular, his silver body-armor shining.

It was Durge.

“Shall I destroy him now?” he cried. He raised his arm and pointed a blaster at Boba. On his chest the Mandalorian skull seemed to burn.

Boba tensed. From the corner of his eye he could see Jabba’s guards, dozens of them. The doors were blocked.

He looked down. He could see a long groove in the floor.

A trapdoor. Jabba kept pit beasts for his depraved entertainment. And to punish those he was unhappy with. There would be no exit that way, either.

Boba glanced up. Beams crisscrossed the ceiling. Feline shooks were chained there, their tusks dripping. Their evil red eyes watched Boba hungrily.

Durge took a step toward Boba. “It will be my pleasure to kill you,” he said, aiming his blaster.

“Your pleasure, perhaps!” boomed Jabba. “But not mine.”

He gestured impatiently at Durge. The great bounty hunter continued to stare at Boba. Inside his battle helmet his eyes flickered crimson. Finally, he lowered his blaster. “If not now,” he said, “then later.”

“I have a task,” continued Jabba the Hutt. “Someone has interfered with my smuggling trade. Someone has refused to work with me. That someone must be killed.”

“I will see to it!” said Boba. His voice echoed loudly through the throne room.

“So you say.” Jabba leaned back on his throne. He extended his flabby hand. Immediately, a servant filled it with wriggling worms.

Jabba chewed the worms thoughtfully. He pointed at Boba. He said, “Mandalorian, you have no weapons!”

The bloated crime lord began to laugh. From everywhere in the room more laughter rang out.

Only Durge was silent. He continued to stare at Boba hatefully.

Boba shook his head. *Think fast!*

“That is so, O Exalted Jabba,” he said quickly. “I have waited to receive my arms from you, and you alone. Because you are the greatest among your kind. And I will be the greatest among bounty hunters!”

Jabba smiled. “A good answer!”

Boba turned and stared fearlessly up at Durge. “And a true one!”

The bounty hunter reached for his blaster. “You will suffer great pain for that. I think it’s time we saw what’s under your mask!”

With a roar, Durge lunged for him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

“Hoh hoh!” Jabba shook with delight. “Durge and an unarmed warrior!”

Boba wasted no time. Before Durge could catch him, Boba dove between his legs.

Jabba laughed, crying, “He is fast!”

“Not fast enough!” yelled Durge.

A flaming burst of red and orange shot from his weapon. Boba rolled. In an instant he was on his feet again. He looked around.

A few meters away was the spit. The squid dangled from it like a huge, empty glove. Fingers of flame ran up and down its tentacles.

Boba raced toward it, quick as a heartbeat. He grabbed one end of the spit. The metal was warm, but not hot. With a grunt he yanked it up, turning.

“You!” shouted Durge. One hand held a blaster, the other a dagger.

But all Boba saw was the Mandalorian skull blazing on his chest. He gave a shout, then swung the long metal pole. The sizzling squid’s tentacles fanned out like blades. They struck Durge in the face. For a moment he was blinded.

“Argh!”

But a moment was enough. Boba drove the metal pole at Durge's chest. The squid exploded into globs of burning fat, spattering Durge's face.

"That'll teach you!" yelled Boba. He turned, panting, to Jabba. "Now, if we could—"

"Not quite, Mandalorian!"

Boba darted to one side—but not fast enough. Something whistled toward him: Durge's blade. Boba ducked. He felt a glancing blow on his helmet. There was an instant of utter darkness. Then light and air poured like water across his face. Beside him he heard a sickening thump.

"What is this?" shouted Jabba in surprise. He heaved himself halfway from his throne. One plump hand pointed at the floor.

Boba blinked. He stared at the ground beside him—

Into the empty eyes of his battle helmet

"He's only a boy!" shrilled one of Jabba's Twi'lek dancers. Her blue skin gleamed as she looked disdainfully at Durge. "The new bounty hunter is a boy!"

"A boy?" echoed Jabba. For a moment he was silent.

Boba froze. His hand reached for his helmet, but he didn't dare move. A few meters away, Durge also stood watching him, his goal of unmasking Boba accomplished.

Then Jabba began to laugh. "A boy! And he defeated Durge!"

"He will not live to manhood!" With a cry Durge started toward Boba.

"Stop!" roared Jabba. Immediately a dozen Gamorrean guards surrounded the bounty hunter. Durge raised his blaster.

Then more guards appeared. Reluctantly he holstered the weapon. The gaze he turned upon Boba held more fury and pure hatred than Boba had ever seen. When he spoke, it was in a low voice that only Boba could hear.

"I will hunt you down. That is my assignment, and I *never* leave an assignment unfinished."

## Elizabeth Hand

Quickly Boba turned away. He picked up his helmet and held it beneath his arm. Then he looked up at the throne. He knew the crime lord was his best chance at protection.

“O Wise Jabba,” he said. “Let me serve you. Arm me. Give me a speeder. Then tell me your bidding, and I will do it.”

“Arm you?” Jabba’s mouth split into a taunting smile. “But you have no need of arms! You have just shown us that! As for my bidding...”

The sluglike gangster looked from Boba to Durge. “Someone has interfered with my smuggling operation here on Tatooine. He has a ring of thieves who help him. They steal my weapon shipments. Then he sells the weapons.”

“Who does he sell them to?” asked Boba.

“To the Separatists.” Jabba leaned forward. “But I do not care who he sells them to. I care only that he has taken what is mine. I want him destroyed. I want his supporters killed as well.”

Boba nodded. “Do you know his name?”

“Yes. He is a Neimoidian. His name is Gilramos Libkath.”

“Gilramos *Libkath*?” repeated Boba in disbelief.

“That’s what I said,” replied Jabba impatiently. “Do you know of him?”

*Libkath! That’s the name Ygabba used—for the Master!*

Boba hid his dismay. “Do I know of him?” he repeated.

Quickly he looked aside at Durge.

The hated bounty hunter was easily twice his size. Durge was armed. He had a speeder. He hated Mandalorians.

And, to judge from the way he stared at Boba, he hated Boba most of all.

*I was lucky just now, Boba thought. I’ve taken Durge by surprise—twice.*

*He will never let that happen again.*

Boba’s hand tightened on his helmet.

*My greatest strength right now is knowledge.*

*I know who Gilramos Libkath is. I know where he is.*

Boba corrected himself. *Where he will be, when he arrives to take the weapons Ygabba and the others stole for him.*

"I asked you a question!" said Jabba. "Do you know of Gilramos Libkath?"

Boba hesitated. Then he shook his head. "No. But I will find him."

"Do not trust him!" Durge broke in. Around him the Gamorrean guards grunted under their breath. "He has deceived you once already! He will do so again!"

Durge thrust his fist toward Boba. "Give him to me, Jabba! I will make his lies die with him!"

Jabba regarded Durge thoughtfully. He turned to Boba. "He tells the truth. You deceived me—and those who deceive me do not live to speak of it."

"O Great Immensity! I did not deceive you," Boba replied. His voice was smooth and flattering. "I could never deceive your great wisdom! I wanted only to show how ill prepared *this* bounty hunter was—by deceiving *him*."

He pointed at Durge. Jabba twisted to stare at him.

"Ah!" agreed the mighty gangster. He smiled. "Of course! I knew that!"

He gave a rolling laugh. Around him his lackeys tittered and sneered.

"Thank you, O Jabba." Boba looked at him boldly. "Now, if you give me new weapons, I will leave. I will not return until I have captured Gilramos Libkath."

"Give you weapons?" Jabba's voice turned cold. "I give nothing!"

He motioned to an alcove. Immediately Bib Fortuna stepped out from where he had been waiting. Jabba said, "These bounty hunters are wasting my time. They talk when they should act. This one"—Jabba pointed at Durge—"he has let a mere boy defeat him! His reflexes have grown slow." A sly smile creased Jabba's face. "Durge needs to sharpen his skills. Then he will hunt faster. He will hunt better."

## Elizabeth Hand

"I will sharpen my teeth upon this boy's bones!" shouted Durge.

"Perhaps." Jabba shook his head. "But first you will meet several of my pit beasts."

Boba jolted backward as the ground beneath him trembled.

The trapdoor was opening!

"Combat arachnids!" squealed the Twi'lek dancer.

Murmurs of excitement filled the room. The Gamorrean guards shoved each other in expectation. Durge glared at Boba, then raised a fist defiantly at Jabba.

"I will best them!" he cried.

At their feet a wide gap appeared in the floor. Darkness filled it.

Darkness, and a chittering sound. As Boba stared, two immense Caridan combat arachnids clattered across the pit floor. Each had twelve legs, sharp and covered with razor spines. More spines covered their backs. Their mouths gaped open to reveal teeth like dripping daggers. Above their teeth, a dozen eyes glistened like poisonous jewels.

Boba sucked his breath in sharply. At the sound the arachnids swiveled. They stared up. Twenty-four spider eyes gazed at Boba unblinking.

"They are hungry," murmured Bib Fortuna. He smiled.

"As for you," Jabba looked at Boba. "Unless Durge's reflexes have gotten very, *very* slow, he will triumph."

"And then I will hunt," said Durge. His crimson eyes remained fixed on Boba. "I will hunt you!"



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Boba fought a wave of fear. He looked at Jabba. “I have no weapons, O Great One—”

“Do you dare to argue with me?” roared Jabba. “You have a head start—a few minutes, if you are lucky. A few seconds, if you are not.”

He gave a signal to the Gamorrean guards. They grabbed Durge. He resisted, but only a little; he wanted to fight. They dragged him to the edge of the floor. Below, the arachnids raised their legs threateningly. Their hungry mouths snapped open and shut.

“Drop him,” said Jabba.

With grunts of pleasure, the guards shoved Durge into the pit. In the last instant before he fell, his eyes locked with Boba’s.

“I will see you soon!” Durge shouted. “And it will be for the last time!”

The great bounty hunter dropped heavily to the pit floor. His weapons were already raised, his eyes blazing.

The combat arachnids raced toward him. A ball of flame exploded from Durge’s blaster.

*Whatever else he is, thought Boba, Durge is no coward.*

An ominous voice sounded in Boba’s ear. “You are eager to join him?” Bib Fortuna asked.

## Elizabeth Hand

"No thanks!" said Boba.

He backed away from the pit opening. On his throne, Jabba ate a fistful of worms. He belched, then looked at Boba.

"Perhaps you also need to sharpen your reflexes?"

Boba bowed hastily. "I will return—with Gilramos Libkath!" he said.

"Not just Gilramos," the gangster overlord warned. "I want his followers destroyed as well. *Every last one of them.*"

Boba's mouth went dry. He thought of Ygabba and the other children. He remembered the eerie glowing eyes on their palms. He remembered how tired they looked. How hungry.

How despairing, and how sad.

"I will deal with them, O Exalted One," said Boba.

*And I will, too!* he thought. *But Jabba doesn't need to know exactly how.*

Turning, he raced from the throne room.

"Now what?" Boba muttered to himself. *I know where Gilramos is, but how do I get there?*

He ran until he reached the end of a long hallway. He stopped, panting, and looked around.

The hall divided into two passages. One passage was brightly lit. Cool air flowed from it. In the distance, Boba saw service droids and a Drovian servant waiting by a door.

He turned to the other passage. It was dark. The floor was rough.

But it smelled good, it smelled like food. It smelled like cooking.

"Gab'borah!"

*"The seventh kitchen,"* the old man had said. *"That is my customary place of employment."*

Boba began to run down the dark passage. As he did, the smell of cooking grew stronger. After a minute, he came to an open door. He peered inside.

It was a large kitchen. Steam filled the air. Huge pots bubbled on an open fireplace. An otterlike Selonian cook stood over the pots, stirring. He looked at Boba and frowned.

"Is this the seventh kitchen?" Boba gasped.

The Selonian shook his head. He dipped a long spoon into the pot. He lifted it, displaying a fat pink tube larva.

"This is the first kitchen," he said. He held the steaming grub toward Boba. "Care to taste?"

"Uh, not today!" said Boba.

He raced back into the hall. He glanced back down toward the main entry. He could see figures running back and forth. He heard shouting.

"Durge has already escaped," Boba said. "Man, he's fast—but I'm faster!"

He ran to the next door. Huge tanks filled with water lined the walls. Inside them, green and blue seafah shellfish crawled. Lambro sharks, another delicacy, swam restlessly back and forth.

"Kitchen seven?" Boba shouted at a droid dropping shellfish into a boiling cauldron.

"That way," the droid said, pointing farther on.

Back into the hall! The noise from the far end was louder now. Boba didn't waste time looking. He ran to the next door, then the next.

The third kitchen held vats of bubbling mugruebe stew. The smell was so good that Boba almost couldn't tear himself away.

But he had no trouble leaving the fourth room. It wasn't really a kitchen, but a breeding ground for white worms—millions of them. They squirmed and wriggled in long open trenches. Droids scooped up buckets of slimy worms and placed them on a conveyor belt.

"Yuck!" said Boba.

He would never be *that* hungry!

The fifth kitchen held only vegetables and fruits. Many of them were alive and still moving.

## Elizabeth Hand

The sixth kitchen was devoted to meat. Boba stuck his head through the door. A Caridan cook waved a huge knife at him.

“Yes!” The oversized, roachlike alien grinned with excitement. “Finally! Our main course has arrived!”

“Wrong kitchen!” Boba yelled hastily.

He ran back into the hall. From the far end came shouts. He heard a deep voice he recognized as Durge’s. He heard the loud explosive burst from a blaster.

He heard footsteps and an angry yell. They were very close.

Just ahead of Boba was the last door. Hutttese letters and numerals were carved on it.

“This better be kitchen number seven,” said Boba grimly.

He shoved the door open. Several men and women in Tatooine clothing stood around a long table. Strange objects covered it. They looked like brightly colored toys, or perhaps they were weapons? Boba couldn’t tell.

But whatever they were, they smelled good.

No. They smelled *great*.

“Can I help you?” a woman asked.

Boba stood still. For a second he was dizzy. He breathed in the warm sugar, chocolate, scry-mint. He thought he might faint from hunger.

“Young sir!”

Boba blinked. In front of him was Gab’borah. The old man wore a bright green cook’s robe and hat. One hand held a large spoon. The other grasped a wiggling eye-stalk. Its round blue eye peered at Boba.

“I’m putting the finishing touches on tonight’s dessert,” explained Gab’borah. He turned briskly and walked to the table. He bent and set the eye-stalk in the middle of one of the bright objects. It was not a toy or a weapon, Boba saw now. It was a cake.

“There!” said Gab’borah proudly. He beamed at Boba. “I’m so glad you came to visit me!”

From the hallway behind them came a sudden yell. Boba whirled. He yanked the door shut. He locked it.

"I need your help!" he gasped. "Now!"

The old man stared at him. An instant later he nodded.

"Go!" he said. He shooed away the other cooks. Then he looked at Boba again.

"What is it?" he asked in a low voice.

Another bellow came from behind the closed door. Gab'borah raised a knowing eyebrow.

"Ah—now I understand!" he said. "It is Durge. Jabba has set him loose on you."

"Right," said Boba. He looked around desperately. "Gab'borah, I need to get out of here fast. Not just out of this room. I need to get away from the entire fortress."

Gab'borah frowned. He and Boba glanced at the door. It was shaking. In a moment, Durge would burst through.

"Come with me," whispered the old man. He crossed the room, Boba at his heels. "Here—"

Gab'borah opened a door. Inside was a sort of closet, and another door. The closet was filled with junk.

Gab'borah muttered, "Now, I know it's here somewhere..."

The old man pawed through everything, searching. Old kitchen tools, bowls, and pans, discarded stove parts, cutlery...

And, hanging beside the door, a jet pack.

"Here it is!" Gab'borah grabbed the jet pack and handed it to Boba. "You see, I too am always thinking of escape!"

Boba examined the jet pack. It was an older model and designed for an adult. He looked at the fuel supply canisters.

"They're still full" he said. He looked gratefully at Gab'borah and grinned. "Thanks—this is great!"

"It is my pleasure," said the old man with a bow.

He watched as Boba adjusted the straps. Then Boba slung it onto his back. From the corridor came a deafening boom.

"Mandalorian runt!" a voice roared. Boba looked out in time to see Durge crash through the kitchen door.

## Elizabeth Hand

“Go now!” cried Gab’borah. He pushed open the door inside the supply closet. He shoved Boba through it. “Quickly!”

“Whoa,” exclaimed Boba.

He stood on a narrow space, hundreds of meters above the ground. Around him was the immensity of Jabba’s fortress. Above, two orange suns burned and dazzled. Heat flashed down like toxic rain.

Below, so distant it was like a flaming mirage, stretched the Dune Sea.

“Out of my way, old man!” shouted Durge.

“Go!” cried Gab’borah as the huge bounty hunter pushed him aside.

Boba looked back. He didn’t need any more urging. Just meters away, the murderous bounty hunter stood with his blaster aimed right at him.

“Now I’ve got you right where I want you!” Durge jeered. “Ready to die?”

“Not this time!” yelled Boba. He yanked his helmet over his face. He switched on the jet pack’s ignition. Flame spurted behind him. Heat seared the back of his legs.

But Boba had no time to think about that. He had no time to think about anything.

*“Whoooo—eeeeeee!”* Boba yelled.

Beneath him the world fell away.

He was flying!

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Boba had flown before, of course. He had flown in airspeeders and on swoop bikes. He had flown inside his hyperfast starship, *Slave I*.

But nothing was quite like this.

“Man, this is great!” he whooped as he somersaulted through the air. Jabba’s palace was so small now it looked like one of Gab’borah’s cakes. When Boba looked back, he could see Durge. The bounty hunter stood within the doorway leading into empty air. He was a shining speck no bigger than an insect. He was smaller than an insect.

Then he was gone!

Boba watched as the citadel disappeared into the landscape. Then he did a few more somersaults. He dove and swooped the way *Slave I* did through space, the way he had seen his own father swing through the air. He practiced steering the jet pack, remembering his father’s movements, his father’s way. He switched off the ignition and let his body go into freefall.

The ground raced to meet him, red and gold and black. At the last second, Boba switched the ignition back on. The fuel packs blazed and thundered. He pulled out of the dive. He soared back into the shimmering air. He spun a few more times, just for luck.

## Elizabeth Hand

Then he adjusted his helmet. He turned on its navigation program.

“Mos Espa,” he commanded. Inside the helmet, red lights flickered to green. A stream of directional codes flashed before Boba’s eyes. Then a virtual map shimmered across Boba’s field of vision. He blinked.

*It’s too faraway*, he thought in dismay. A sailbarge might be able to get there in a day, but a jet pack?

Never.

Now what?

Boba hovered, looking around. Far below and behind him he could just make out Jabba’s palace.

A steady stream of tiny bright objects flowed from it into the surrounding desert: speeders and sailbarges, doing Jabba’s bidding.

*A speeder could get me there in no time*, Boba thought grimly. *No way I could steal one now, without getting caught.*

But a sailbarge...

He thought of the sailbarge that had brought him here. It had been crowded and disorderly, even with Jabba aboard.

But Jabba was in the palace now, along with Bib Fortuna. No one would be checking the barges as carefully as they had before.

Quickly Boba swooped down. He adjusted the jet pack’s speed to save fuel. He’d need it later, when he got closer to Mos Espa. He flew as close to the gate as he could, squinting.

There!

A cargo skiff was angling its way out the gate. Its massive upper deck was covered with crates and empty cages. Boba could just make out a few droids on board, doing last-minute checks of the vessel’s cargo. If he could just stay out of sight...

He brought himself down, silently, approaching the skiff from the side. Within the darkness of the open gate stood a few security guards. They were talking and laughing; they weren’t doing their job.



*Good thing!* thought Boba. He steered the jet pack until he hung in the air just a few meters from the deck. Huge stacks of crates were there, secured with netting. There was a gap between one stack and the next. Too small for a human or Gamorrean guard, but just big enough—barely—for Boba. He looked around, making sure the guards were still distracted.

They were. Boba took a deep breath. He powered down on the jet pack until he was directly above the deck. He switched the power off and touched down, then darted between the stacks, his heart pounding.

Safe!

For now.

The skiff traveled for hours. Boba could see little, crouched where he was, so he used the time to rest. After a while, the rocking of the skiff lulled him to sleep. When finally he woke, Tatooine's two suns had traveled across the sky: It was late.

*Wonder where we are?* thought Boba. He peered out, but saw only endless dunes. Above him the sky shimmered with heat. He ducked back into his refuge, and once more tapped into his helmet's nav program.

"I need the coordinates for Mos Espa," he whispered. "Hope it's not far...."

It wasn't. He checked his fuel levels: just enough to get him there. He stuck his head out and looked around.

There was no sign of security droids, or anyone else.

Boba's heart leaped with excitement. *Now or never!*

Then he leaped, too—up, up, up! The jet pack sent him arrowing into the sky. Below him the skiff shrank to almost nothing, a speck in an ocean of sand. Far, far behind him was Jabba's palace. Somewhere in front of him Mos Espa—and Boba's future—waited.

Boba soared on.

Below him the Dune Sea flashed past. He saw moisture farms, the metal carcass of an immense sand-wrecked freighter. He saw

## Elizabeth Hand

tiny outposts where the moisture farmers bought their supplies and traded water for food.

Once he saw the ground hundreds of meters below him shift and shudder like jelly. A Sarlaac was hunting beneath the sand.

He also saw a tiny black jot against the sky. It was many kilometers behind him.

But it was gaining.

It was Durge. Hunting Boba.

“Let’s see if we can lose him,” Boba said. Ahead he saw a long, ragged line in the sand.

A canyon.

He steered the jet pack so that he dropped into the canyon. It was ten or twenty kilometers long. And it was cooler than the open air high above. Boba flew through it. He zigzagged along the canyon passage. He lifted his helmet and let the cool air touch his cheeks.

Then he saw the end of the canyon approaching. He lifted up, up into the hot dry air. He looked behind him.

There was no sign of Durge.

*Lost him.*

He looked ahead.

*Up!*

There, very close now, was Mos Espa.

And there, hovering just meters away from Boba, was Durge’s speeder!

“Got you!” shouted Durge. He started to stand, a flamethrower at the ready. He took aim. The speeder rocked slightly as he got his balance.

“We’ll see about that,” retorted Boba. Stealthily he reached down for the ignition switch on his jet pack. He stared boldly at the armored bounty hunter.

“Three,” counted Boba to himself. He watched Durge take aim. He waited until the very last second. “Two...one—”

Fire exploded from the flamethrower. At the same instant, the jet pack’s flames went out. Boba dropped like a stone.

Where his head had been, a ball of fire burst. Boba switched the jet pack back to full power. He somersaulted, kicking at the air until he was parallel to the ground far below. With a roar his jet pack sent him arrowing forward, beneath Durge's speeder.

"You—!"

Durge howled in rage. Another flamethrower burst exploded harmlessly behind Boba, then another. The speeder rocked as the bounty hunter jumped back behind his console. The vehicle turned to pursue Boba.

"I can outrun him," Boba said aloud. He wasn't sure if this was true. But he felt better saying it. "I can do this...."

He looked up. Tatooine's two suns glared through the haze. Boba angled himself so that the suns were directly in front of him. If he did this right, their blaze might momentarily blind Durge.

And a moment was all Boba needed to escape!

He headed to where the bazaar was most crowded, vendors shouting their wares and hundreds of beings haggling for bargains.

"If I can get in there, I can lose him," said Boba. "Then I can find Ygabba..."

He glanced back. Sure enough, Durge's speeder had slowed. Boba could see the reflected glare of sunlight on Durge's body armor.

Boba looked ahead. There was no way Durge's speeder could maneuver through the slow throng of shoppers.

"This is it," murmured Boba.

He cut back on his jet pack's power. His stomach seemed to drop from him as he fell forty meters. Almost immediately he powered back up and zoomed straight ahead. He raced just over the heads of the bewildered beings. He looked back.

Durge was out of sight. Boba had lost him'.

He turned gleefully. He amped the jet pack's power to full.

Ahead of him was where he'd find Gilramos Libkath.

Ahead of him was triumph—or death.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Boba knew he would be easier to spot if he was flying.

“I should get down there,” he said, staring at the maze of streets and alleys below. “I can hide from Durge, at least for a little while.”

But he didn’t have a little while. He had hardly any time at all.

And he didn’t know exactly where Gilramos Libkath’s lair was.

Boba frowned. He cruised slowly above cantinas and docking areas. In the distance, he saw the battered outline of Mentis Qinx’s facility. He imagined he could see *Slave I*, waiting.

“I’ll be there soon,” he said.

He looked out again. Not very far off, a huge building rose. It nearly blotted out the sky.

*The arena.*

*Gilramos’s lair was near the arena!*

He swerved, dropping until he flew only a few meters above the ground. A few merchants glared at him as they scurried past. Boba shrugged.

“Beats walking!” he yelled at them.

Ahead of him the main road ended abruptly. Boba surged upward, flying above a high wall. Beyond were more alleys. He

saw water vendors arguing and a bantha waiting patiently outside a cantina door.

But he didn't see where Ygabba had taken him before.

He powered up, soaring a few meters higher. He looked down.

And saw it.

Below him was the familiar outline of a gutted Theed cruiser. Dead vegetation clung to its sides. Broken glass, scrap metal, and litter covered it.

To the casual viewer, it was just another wrecked starship.

To Boba, it was the first step toward freedom.

*Here goes nothing.*

He powered down, trying to slow his descent. Still, when he touched down it was with a jolt.

*"Ooooff!"*

He reached for the wall, steadying himself. He switched off his jet pack. He patted it.

"You sure came in handy," he said. "Remind me that I owe Gab'borah for this."

He lifted his helmet and wiped the sweat from his face. He was filthy, hot, and tired.

He was also very, very happy. He glanced up and down the alley to make sure no one saw him. He looked up.

No sign of Durge.

For now.

He turned. There was the doorway where he'd chased Ygabba. He took a deep breath. Then he pushed it open and went inside.

Darkness covered him like a cloak. Darkness, and cool air. Boba tapped his helmet, activating his infrared vision. Immediately, he could see.

Before him was a long tunnel. Eerie scarlet light glowed between the blackest shadows he had ever seen. He walked forward carefully. The floor was strewn with broken rubble.

## Elizabeth Hand

Bricks, empty water containers, remnants of food. Boba stopped and nudged something with his foot. He stooped to pick it up.

It was a label. The image of a fat Hutttese face leered above a slogan.

GORGAL SPRINGS GENUINE PURE WATER  
BESTINE'S FINEST

Ygabba had said the weapons shipment was hidden. It was inside a shipment from a moisture farm near Bestine.

It seemed ages ago, but he had only met Ygabba late yesterday. That was when she and the others had stolen the weapons. They would barely have had time to bring them here.

There would have been no time yet for Gilramos to claim his stolen goods.

*He's here, Boba thought. Right now—I can sense him.*

His neck prickled with fear. He began to walk very slowly through the red-lit room. When he reached the tunnel entrance he stopped.

He listened.

He could hear voices. One voice was anxious and pleading. The other was low and sly. It was a voice Boba would know anywhere. It was a voice he wouldn't trust for a nanosecond.

It was Gilramos Libkath.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

As silent as a breath, Boba entered the passage. As he walked the voices grew louder, until he could understand them.

“Master, we grabbed all we could. Then the guards saw him. I had no choice but to stop.”

That voice was Ygabba’s. She sounded desperate...and afraid.

“That is not good enough,” someone hissed. Gilramos—the Neimoidian the children called Master. “There are very important people waiting for these illegal weapons—they aren’t sold anywhere but the black market, and the buyers are relying on *me* to fill the order. You know what happens when you fail.”

There was a sharp cry. Not Ygabba’s voice.

It was the little boy, Murzz.

“Please don’t hurt me!” he whimpered.

Boba’s stomach tightened. Ahead of him a bright patch blazed—the entrance to the central chamber. He switched off his infrared vision so he could see better. He crept forward.

“You know the agreement we made,” Gilramos went on in his smooth, sickly voice.

Boba reached the opening. He crouched safely in the shadows. He stared inside.

In the center of the room stood the tall Neimoidian. His elaborate robes glowed purple and deep blue. His reptilian face

## Elizabeth Hand

was split by a sneer. At his feet sprawled a small figure—Murzz. Ygabba stood protectively beside him.

“Please, Master,” she begged.

Boba shaded his eyes, squinting.

Was this another virtual image of Gilramos Libkath? Or was it really him?

The Neimoidian leaned forward. He grasped Murzz’s shoulder. The boy cried out in fear and pain.

Boba’s fists clenched angrily.

It was truly Gilramos, all right.

The Neimoidian’s clawed hand tightened. His other hand gestured angrily.

“You have failed me! There are supposed to be seventeen cartons of weapons here! And how many do I see? Sixteen!”

Boba leaned forward to get a better look. Many crates were stacked around the perimeter of the room. Each had the same bright label.

### GORGAL SPRINGS GENUINE PURE WATER

But some of the crates were open. And they did not contain water.

They were filled with weapons. Small missiles made with technology banned by the Republic.

Enough to outfit an army. And not an army of children, either. From the corner of his eye, Boba saw several battle droids, their armor gleaming in the shadows.

Boba jumped as Gilramos’s voice rang out commandingly. “Who am I, children?” he demanded.

In the room around him, numerous small figures stood. Each raised a hand. In each hand an eye glowed.

“You are our Master, Libkath,” the children said as one.

Gilramos nodded. “That is so. Who cares for you, children?”

“You do, Master.”



The eyes glowed brighter. In the darkness, the battle droids moved, raising their arms menacingly. Some of the children whimpered. Murzz kicked angrily at Gilramos.

“Let me go!” he shouted.

Gilramos only clutched him tighter.

“Who gives you refuge?” he said.

“You do, Master,” repeated the children.

“That is so.” The reptilian sneer became a scowl. Gilramos reached for Ygabba, grabbing her by the shoulder. “And what do I ask in return?”

“Obedience, Master.”

“And if I do not receive it?”

Quickly Boba looked around. A pile of bricks stood near the entrance. He grabbed one.

“Answer me!” shouted Gilramos. He shook Ygabba angrily. “*If I do not receive obedience?*”

Boba crept to the very edge of the doorway. He took aim. He threw.

Bull’s-eye!

With a grunt Gilramos staggered backward. His tall hat tottered then fell. He clutched his head. Immediately Ygabba grabbed Murzz and darted away. All around the room, children raised their hands. Shining eyes glowed brightly, then flickered. With an ominous whir, the battle droids moved into position.

“Who dares to strike me?” shouted Gilramos.

“Why don’t you pick on someone closer to your own size?” Boba shouted back. He grabbed another brick and heaved it.

*Bam!*

This time Gilramos stumbled and nearly fell. With excited squeals the children raced away from him. They clambered up the walls, taking shelter on the shelves circling the room. Only Ygabba remained where she was, staring as Boba stepped into the room.

“Boba Fett!” she yelled. She grinned so broadly that for an instant he forgot about Gilramos and the droids.

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“That’s me!” Boba yelled back.

“Fett?” repeated Gilramos. He lurched up again. A trickle of pale yellow fluid ran down his face. “You dare to strike me?”

“That’s right!” retorted Boba. He held up his hands, palm out. “You don’t control me!”

“But I will!”

Gilramos raised his arm. A bolt of crimson light flowed from it. Was it some sort of power or just a trick? Boba wasn’t about to find out. He ducked, then jammed on his jet pack. He soared upward, kicking at the Neimoidian’s head.

“Argh!” shouted Gilramos. The battle droids froze, awaiting orders.

*If I can just grab one of those weapons, I can blast him, and the droids!* Boba thought. He angled toward an open crate. *Then I can claim Jabba’s reward!*

The crate was just below him. Boba stretched his arm toward it. His fingers grazed a blaster’s grip.

*Wham!*

Violet light jabbed at Boba’s eyes. He cried out, then jolted upward. With a thud his head smashed into something.

The ceiling!

With a cry he fell.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

For a second all went black. Then Boba blinked and looked up. Above him a lizard face leered beneath an ornate mitred hat.

“Now what have we here?” Gilramos asked. He licked his thin lips. “A strong and clever boy. One who would make a fine addition to my army. After some modifications, Of course.”

He grabbed Boba’s hand. Boba lashed out at him, but the Neimoidan was surprisingly strong.

“This will only take a moment,” Gilramos said. Behind him the droids moved into formation, their weapons aimed at Boba. “And then...”

“The Mandalorian is mine!” thundered a voice.

Gilramos whirled. So did Boba.

“Durge,” he whispered.

The bounty hunter’s armored figure filled the entire doorway. In each massive arm he cradled a blaster. One was aimed at Gilramos’s head. The other was aimed at Boba.

“One move and you’ll be blasted into the Dune Sea!” Durge gloated.

Boba kicked at Gilramos. Durge took aim.

“Do you doubt me, runt?” Durge’s eyes blazed.

He stepped into the room. Boba heard the hiss of the children breathing in sharply. The battle droids swiveled, their weapons

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pointing from Boba to Durge. Durge lifted his head. He looked around.

He smiled. A wide, horrible smile.

“So this is your army, eh, Gilramos?” He looked dismissively at the droids, then walked over and nudged a small girl with his blaster. “Thieving children and a handful of droids?”

Boba watched him. *If I only had a weapon*, he thought. *I could free us all!*

But could he? He glanced past where Gilramos held tightly to him.

There were crates of weaponry everywhere. One stray blast, and the whole place would become a weapon!

*Wait a minute*, Boba thought. From the corner of his eye he saw someone move. Not a droid. Not Gilramos, either.

Ygabba. She stood near a pile of crates. Her head turned. She looked desperately at Boba.

Immediately he knew what to do.

“Ygabba!” he shouted. “Lead them out! Run—*NOW?*”

At the same time that Boba yelled, he flattened himself against the floor. With a roar, Durge turned. There was a flare of light from his blaster. Boba kicked at Gilramos. The Neimoidian shrieked, then tried to grab him. The droids surged forward.

Too late! Boba was free!

He slammed himself to the floor. Above him Durge’s blast struck Gilramos. The Neimoidian fell. Another blast struck a droid with a muted explosion as the others tried to blast Durge.

“This way!” Ygabba shouted. “Fast!”

Like a flock of birds, the children scattered. Ygabba stood by an opening and yelled at them. Children raced everywhere. They dove through holes in the walls. They clambered through gaps in the ceiling. Everywhere glowing eyes shimmered and shone as the children yanked one another to safety.

All but Boba.

“Now you!” Durge roared. Another blast roared from his weapon as a droid strode toward him. The droid fell, and Durge laughed. “You’re next!” he cried, and aimed at Boba.

Boba glanced back. He saw Gilramos crawling across the floor. His hat was beside him.

Neimoidians place huge value on their hats. Boba knew that. They represent power and prestige. No Neimoidian would ever be without one.

Not unless he was dead.

Boba grabbed the hat. Gilramos gave a desperate cry. “No!”

Boba turned. Another voice rose from the room.

“Boba!”

He looked up. All of the children were gone—except for Ygabba. She stood by the open passage, waving at him. Beside her rose a pile of weapons.

“This way!” she shouted.

Boba clutched Gilramos’s hat to him. He looked down at Durge, surrounded by the remaining battle droids. Boba reached for the ignition of his jet pack. He jammed it as hard as he could.

He flew.

“You die!” bellowed Durge. He swung around, the droids forgotten. His blasters pointed at Boba. Boba soared above him. He swooped down, one arm reaching for Ygabba.

“Grab hold!” Boba shouted.

She grabbed his hand. In front of him was the passage leading from the chamber. Behind him were Durge and the Neimoidian’s droids.

“Hold tight!” Boba yelled.

He flew toward the pile of weapons. At the last possible instant, he swerved, zooming into the tunnel.

“My hat!” screeched Gilramos. “Droids! Stop him!”

“Take that!” thundered Durge. And fired. This time his blast ricocheted into one of the crates.

Immediately the world exploded. Ygabba cried out, but she hung on. Boba kept his head down, soaring toward freedom.

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Behind them deafening explosions rocked the gutted Theed Cruiser.

“You okay?” shouted Boba above the din.

“You bet!” yelled Ygabba.

“Good! ’Cause we’re almost out of here!”

Ahead of them, light bloomed. Behind them the explosions grew muted, like far-off thunder.

Moments later, they were outside again.

They were free.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“That was some entrance you made back there!” said Ygabba.

Boba nodded. he reached for the jet pack’s ignition. They touched down.

“Yeah,” he said, grinning. “And some exit, too!”

They ran until they were a safe distance from the alley.

“Don’t worry,” said Ygabba. She looked back. “Those Theed ships are built to withstand hyper-space. Everything inside may be gone. But the damage will be contained.”

Boba nodded. A few meters away, a throng of small figures stood, watching them.

“Ygabba!” someone cried. “You made it!”

Ygabba ran up to them, beaming. The youngest children ran over to hug her. “I sure did—with a little help from my friend!”

She looked at Boba. He pushed back his helmet, then glanced at what he still held—Gilramos’s hat. He looked back and frowned.

“I don’t know if he’s gone or not,” he said.

Ygabba walked over to him. She also looked back. “You’re right,” she said. “I don’t think anyone could survive that, but...”

“Ygabba, look!”

Ygabba and Boba both turned.

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Around them a circle of children raised their hands, palm out. Scores of glowing eyes stared at Boba, unblinking.

Then, like water seeping into dry sand, the eyes faded beneath their skin.

“They’re gone!” gasped Murzz.

“Yes!” Boba punched his fist at the air triumphantly.

He raised Gilramos’s hat above him. The children cheered.

“What about Durge?” said Ygabba.

Boba’s face clouded.

“Good question,” he said. He looked at the alley. Smoke crept along the ground. “He might be dead. But I wouldn’t bet on it.”

Thoughtfully, Boba fingered the ignition of his jet pack. He glanced at the fuel tanks.

“They’re nearly empty,” he said. He pushed his helmet farther back on his head. He stared at Ygabba. “Now what? How can I return to Jabba’s fortress? I can’t afford to pay for the repairs on my starship until Jabba pays *me*.”

Ygabba looked at him. She grinned. “Wait one minute,” she said.

She turned and called the children to her. “All of you, listen. You know where Bley-san’s cantina is?”

The children nodded. “Great,” said Ygabba. She smiled at them encouragingly, then stooped. “I want all of you to go there. Ask for Bley-san. She owes me a favor. Tell her I sent you. She will help you find your parents or relatives. She will help you get home.”

Ygabba straightened. “Bley-san is a good woman,” she said. “You can trust her. Now go! Remember, you’re free now!”

Laughing in delight, the children swarmed around Ygabba. They hugged her and called out their good-byes.

“Wait a minute,” said Ygabba. She held up a hand and turned. She looked at Boba. Then she looked at the children. She asked, “Aren’t you all forgetting something?”

The children turned. They looked at Boba. They raised their hands—empty palms now, except for dirt and soot. They smiled.



“Thank you, Boba Fett!” they shouted. Then, giggling, they turned and ran to find Bley-san’s cantina.

Boba watched them go. He felt something he had never felt before.

Happiness. But also pride.

“Well,” he said when the children were out of sight. “We’d better leave, too.”

Ygabba cocked a thumb at him.

“Come here,” she said. She began to hurry down the alley.

Boba followed her. As they rounded a curve, she stopped.

“Check it out,” she said.

In front of them hovered a sleek cruiser.

“Wow,” breathed Boba. “That’s beautiful! Who’s is it?”

“Mine,” said Ygabba. At Boba’s surprised look, she shrugged. “Well, it was Master Libkath’s. But I figure he owes it to me.”

Boba didn’t argue. He watched as Ygabba walked over and punched an access code into a panel. Immediately, the top popped open. Ygabba swung herself inside. She motioned for Boba to join her. The cover snapped shut. The cruiser began to rise. Boba lowered his helmet. He put Gilramos’s hat on his lap.

“Do you know how to fly this thing?” asked Ygabba.

Boba smiled. He took the controls. The cruiser leaped through the air

“Next stop, Jabba’s fortress!” he cried.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

It was night when they finally arrived at the palace of Jabba the Hutt. They docked the cruiser, then headed for the main gate.

Armed sentries guarded the huge iron door. But when Boba displayed Gilramo's hat, they looked impressed.

"You may pass," a sentry said. He looked at Boba, then cocked his thumb. "But not her."

"She's with me," snapped Boba. "Or do you want to discuss this matter with Jabba?"

The guard grumbled. But he let them go.

"They seem to know you," said Ygabba. She looked at Boba admiringly.

"Yeah, I get around," he said.

They approached Jabba's throne room. Noises of merriment greeted them.

"Sounds like a feast in progress," said Boba.

They went inside.

To judge by the mess, the feast was nearly over. Empty plates covered a long table. Guests reclined in chairs, or milled around, talking. On his throne sat Jabba. He greedily ate handfuls of worms. Now and then he would take a long drink from a bubbling tube. Then he belched noisily and laughed.

"Looks like we missed dinner," said Boba.

“No,” said Ygabba. She pointed. “Look there.”

At the end of the table closest to Jabba, there were still numerous plates. Each held a brightly colored cake. Several were topped by waving eye-stalks. Boba glanced at them, then at Jabba.

“O Mightiest of Hutts!” he cried. He strode toward the throne. “I have done as you wished.”

Jabba stared down at him as though he were another wriggling worm. Then he saw the ornate hat that Boba held toward him.

“Give me that,” rumbled Jabba.

Boba handed him the hat. Jabba took it. He held it up to the light. He examined it thoroughly. He sniffed it.

“It stinks of treachery!” he boomed. “It stinks of Gilramos Libkath!”

Beside Jabba, Bib Fortuna whispered, “But can we be sure he is dead?”

Jabba looked at him disdainfully. “No Neimoidian would ever part with his hat!”

He leaned over and dropped it into a smoking pot. Immediately, flames leaped up. In moments, the hat was gone. Only ash remained.

“You have done well!” Jabba cried. Then his eyes narrowed. “But what of Durge?”

Boba shook his head. “Do you see him here, O Great Jabba?” he asked loudly. “He has failed. And I—I have triumphed!”

Jabba looked at him. He nodded. He raised his arms to his guests. “All of you, listen! This young warrior has succeeded where others have failed! Great rewards shall come to you, you—” He stared down at Boba. “What is your name, Mandalorian?”

“Boba. Boba Fett.”

“Boba Fett!” repeated Jabba.

In the room around Boba, everyone applauded.

“Way to go!” said Ygabba. She gave his arm a friendly punch.

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“Thank you, O Jabba,” said Boba. He bowed. *Better not forget that!* he thought.

“Arrange for his bounty,” Jabba commanded Bib Fortuna.

The Twi’lek major-domo nodded. He stepped down from the throne platform and walked to Boba. He handed him a gleaming chip.

“Your pay,” he said.

Boba took the chip. He removed his helmet and slung it over his arm. As he stared at the chip his eyes grew wide.

*This is enough to outfit Slave I three times over!* he thought.

“I have other jobs for you—many of them!” rumbled Jabba the Hutt.

Boba nodded. He took a step backward, Ygabba beside him.

“You think we can eat now?” she whispered.

“I sure hope so,” he whispered back.

He looked up once more at Jabba the Hutt. But the gang lord’s attention had already turned to other matters.

“Quick,” said Ygabba, yanking Boba toward the table. “Before he gives you something else to do!”

But as they approached the table, Ygabba’s expression grew sad. Boba looked at her, then at the many plates. They all held desserts—cakes, puddings, viral jellies, wuorl-pies.

“Aren’t you hungry?” he began. “I thought you said—”

Suddenly Ygabba’s face went pale. She stared in front of her. She gasped.

“Father!” she cried.

Boba turned. At the end of the table a frail figure stood. He wore a bright green cook’s robes and hat. In his hand was a jeweled Vortexian cake knife. As he stared at Ygabba, he too went white.

He exclaimed, “Daughter!”

Boba watched as the two embraced. Ygabba was crying. So was Gab’borah.

“How can this be?” the old man asked. He looked past her, to where Boba stood. “You—?”

Ygabba nodded. "It was him, Father. He saved us, all of us. From Gilramos Libkath."

"Libkath," murmured Gab'borah. He looked as though he were dreaming. "Five years ago, he kidnapped her. That was before Jabba brought me here, as his chef..."

He reached a thin hand to Boba. "Young man, I owe you my heart," he said. "And my daughter's life. Thank you."

Boba shrugged. Then he smiled. "You're welcome."

Gab'borah waved him closer. "Come here!" he said.

He pointed at a cake. It was as tall as Boba, and topped with scry-mint frosting and vannilan pods. At its peak was a Ziziibbon truffle that shone like a gem.

Boba set his helmet on the floor. He slid his credit chip into his pocket, safe beside his father's book. Behind him a voice boomed.

"Do not get too distracted, young man!" Jabba pointed at him. "Tomorrow morning you begin your new life!"

Boba nodded. He thought of *Slave I* waiting for him back in the spaceport. Then he watched as Gab'borah plucked the luscious truffle from the cake and handed it to him.

"Eat!" Gab'borah commanded.

Boba took the candy, grinning.

"Thanks," he said.

At last! An order he was happy to obey!

He heard Jabba laugh and knew—he'd found his future at last.









# STAR WARS<sup>®</sup>

## *BOBA FETT*<sup>™</sup>

A NEW THREAT

ELIZABETH HAND





# CHAPTER ONE

Tatooine's twin suns hung low above the horizon. Once he had thought they looked like demonic eyes, threatening him.

Warning him.

Daring him.

Now they were almost welcoming.

"Prepare for landing," commanded the youth at the console of *Slave I*. He stared out at the red suns, shadows pooling like blood beneath them. Despite himself, he smiled.

*It's good to be back*, thought Boba Fett as he leaned into his seat. In the cockpit behind him was a pair of shriveled hands—all that remained of Boba's last mission. He had gone to the Dune Sea to hunt down the Noghri assassin Jhordvar. The lithe, lidless-eyed alien had made the mistake of betraying Boba's employer.

*Bad idea*, Boba thought, recalling Jhordvar's contempt when he first peered from his desert hideout to see the young bounty hunter standing before him.

"Jabba sends a lackey to do an assassin's job!" the alien hissed.

"Wrong," said Boba. His blaster was already aligned with Jhordvar's eyes. "He sent the best bounty hunter of his house."

Their battle had been brief but intense. Boba offered Jhordvar the chance to accompany him back to Jabba's B'omarr citadel, but the alien refused to surrender.

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Jabba the Hutt had wanted the traitor dead or alive. *Well, he got one out of two*, Boba thought as he guided *Slave I* into the docking bay of Jabba's palace. A desert sandstorm had stranded him for several days in the Noghri's lair, with the alien's body caught outside in the storm. Sand and heat had mummified what remained of Jhordvar. The hands had literally been snapped off by the fierce winds; Boba decided that Jhordvar's ring would be enough to identify him, and so he left the body but took the hands.

"You know, Jhordvar, you should've surrendered when you had the chance," said Boba as *Slave I* touched down. "But you fought bravely, I'll give you that." Boba commanded the ship's computer to shut down, then picked up the Noghri's withered claws. He looked at them, grimacing, then slung them into his pack and disembarked. He left his Mandalorian helmet in the cockpit—he'd get it after he reported in to Jabba.

"I'll see you again soon," he said, letting his hand slide along *Slave I*'s hull. "Real soon."

A pair of Gamorrean guards lolled by the entrance to Jabba's castle. As Boba approached, one of them nudged the other. The two looked at each other in surprise, but quickly straightened.

One of them grunted questioningly.

"I had a slight delay," retorted Boba. He shifted his pack so the hulking boars could get a glimpse of Jhordvar's claws protruding from the top. "Nothing serious. Just a sandstorm."

The Gamorrean guards' eyes widened with respect and—yes!—fear. Boba fought the urge to grin triumphantly. That was almost all the reward he needed. Almost—but not quite. He tipped his head back and stared pointedly at one of the Gamorreans. Hastily the guard turned and opened the massive door for him. Boba strode through proudly.

He would take all the respect he could get. *One earns respect*, his father had always told him. *As for those who are foolish enough not to give it to you—well, for them, there is always fear.*

Boba paused. The heavy door behind him slammed shut. He blinked, waiting for his eyes to adjust to the dimness inside the fortress. He waited for his skin to adjust to the touch of cool air, and for his ears to catch the distant sounds of revelry from the throne room.

*Fear and respect*, he thought with grim satisfaction. *Everything I've learned about those things can be summed up in three little words:*

*Jabba the Hutt.*

Boba turned, and began walking down the corridor. Several protocol droids hurried past him, on their way to do Jabba's bidding. Two of the Hutttese crimelord's Drovion security guards swaggered up and down the halls. Boba watched as they stopped a pair of Jawas, frisking the small yellow-eyed scavengers before letting them pass. As Boba approached, he had the satisfaction of hearing one of Jabba's lackeys mutter his name.

"G'wan," the Drovion spat, waving him past. "You're expected. As a matter of fact, you're early—no one thought you'd be back this soon."

"Some hoped you wouldn't make it back at all!" his companion laughed.

Boba gave him a cold look. "I'll be sure to mention that to Jabba."

The lackey cringed as Boba went on. Being Jabba's favored bounty hunter definitely had its advantages.

When he reached the passage leading to the throne room, he stopped. He could see a dozen or so shadowy figures milling inside the corridor. He recognized several of them by their weapons and body armor: bounty hunters.

*Something's going on*, thought Boba. *But what?*

From inside, shrill music and harsh laughter echoed—the usual sounds of depravity that surrounded Jabba the Hutt.

There was another sound, too, almost as loud.

Boba's stomach was growling.

## Elizabeth Hand

*I haven't eaten since yesterday afternoon, he thought. And it's going to take a while to tell Jabba the whole story about Jhakva. Plus, this will give me a chance to hear any gossip about what's happened since I left...*

He glanced back toward the throne room. Besides the bounty hunters, he saw droids and several ragged-looking space pirates, a young Twi'lek dancer twitching from nerves, and an Arkanian holding a very young and very active Arkanian dragon on a leash.

*Looks like Jabba might be distracted for a few more minutes,* Boba figured. Quickly he turned and hurried down a side passage.

"At last! You've come with the new worm castings!" A Selonian wearing a white chef's robe over its sleek-furred body peered out from a doorway. When it saw Boba, its face fell.

"My mistake," it said, and turned back to stirring something disgusting in a bubbling pot.

Boba kept moving. He passed several doorways, each with a sign on it in Huttese characters. KITCHEN FOUR, KITCHEN FIVE, KITCHEN SIX...

"Kitchen Seven," said Boba with relief as he came to the last door. He adjusted his pack and went inside.

Immediately, he was greeted by the warm simmering scents of baking pod-bread, yowvetch custard, scry-mint. A gnarled figure was bent over a steaming oven. Beside him, another figure was putting the finishing touches on a white worm soufflé.

"Am I too late for breakfast?" asked Boba.

"No breakfast till tomorrow," the elderly figure said without looking up.

"Not even for a starving bounty hunter?"

The two cooks turned.

"Bobal!" cried the younger one. She swiped the hair from her eyes, leaving a smudge of flour. "You're back! And you've gotten even taller!"

Boba grinned. "Maybe you're just shrinking, Ygabba."

Ygabba shook her head. She looked him up and down. "Nope. You're definitely taller. You're going to need some new body armor soon, Boba."

Boba took the pack from his shoulders and set it on the floor. “Tell me about it,” he said. “That’ll be my first order of business with Jabba. Second, actually.” He cocked a thumb at what was in the pack.

Gab’borah looked down. He was Ygabba’s father. As Jabba’s head dessert-chef, he was accustomed to seeing all kinds of revolting things.

But even he was impressed by Boba’s trophy.

“Jabba will be very pleased,” Gab’borah said. He poked at one of the withered hands approvingly. “I didn’t even recognize your voice, Boba. And Ygabba’s right—you’ve grown.”

The old man smiled and pointed to the wall behind Boba. There, over the past two years, Gab’borah had lined up Ygabba and Boba, drawing a line where the top of their heads met the wall. Boba looked at the most recent mark, and, yes, he was many centimeters taller now.

“Bounty hunting must agree with you,” said Gab’borah with a wink. He turned and took a plate of yowvetch custard, still warm and quivering from the oven. “Here, Boba—you look half-famished.”

Boba began eating ravenously. “Mmmm—this is great,” he said.

“Don’t take too long with it,” Ygabba warned. “Something’s happening. There’s a bunch of bounty hunters who’ve been waiting for the last three days to see Jabba. He’s been putting them off—I think he was hoping you’d return—but I don’t think he’s going to wait much longer.”

“Mmmmff.” Boba swallowed the last bit of custard, wiping his mouth on his sleeve. “Thanks, Ygabba. And Gab’borah. For the food, and the news.” He grabbed his pack and headed back into the hall. Ygabba grinned and waved after him.

“See you, Boba!”

“Make sure you drop by before you leave again,” Gab’borah called as Boba strode back toward the throne room. “You’ll need more provisions to fill that new body armor!”

## Elizabeth Hand

This time, Jabba's hangers-on made a point of moving out of the way as soon as they saw Boba coming. He caught the sideways, suspicious looks the other bounty hunters gave him as he passed.

Yet he also saw them gazing at him with grudging admiration—especially when they saw the pair of mummified hands sticking out of his pack. When he reached the entrance to the throne room, he stopped. A short distance away, he could see Jabba's huge form, rising from clouds of incense and smoke like a mountain of sand from the Dune Sea. Even now Boba could not help grimacing at the sight of his employer.

*Man, that is one gross Hutt*, he thought. He gestured at a protocol droid standing nearby.

"You," commanded Boba. The droid swiveled, fixing him with its glowing lidless eyes. "Tell Jabba the Hutt that Boba Fett is here."

The droid inclined its gleaming head slightly.

"Yes, sir," it intoned, and walked smoothly into the throne room, past the guards. The waiting bounty hunters watched as the droid approached the throne, then cried out in its clear robotic voice.

"Lord Jabba! My Lord—"

Heads turned and the music grew still as Boba strode into the room. The droid turned and bowed.

"As you can see, O Mighty Jabba—Boba Fett has returned!"



## CHAPTER TWO

“Hoh hoh hoh!”

Boba stiffened as familiar deep laughter thundered through the vast room. On a platform in the center of the hall reclined the huge, sluglike form of Jabba the Hutt. Behind him, Jabba’s Twi’lek major-domo, Bib Fortuna, stood at attention.

The notorious gangster’s yellow eyes fixed themselves on Boba. As the young bounty hunter strode closer to the throne, the great Hutt raised himself to gaze down on him.

“So!” boomed Jabba in Huttese, a language that Boba now knew well. “The prodigal hunter has returned!” The crime lord’s eyes narrowed as he stared fixedly at Boba. “But he has returned alone. I see no sign of Jhordvar!”

“That’s because the boy has failed!” hissed a voice from the shadows. Boba glanced aside. He saw another bounty hunter, a bulbous-eyed, snout-nosed Aqualish, staring at him hungrily.

“Failed?” Jabba reached for a basket of squirming white worms. He grabbed a fistful of the repellent grubs. “Is this so?”

Boba shot a cold look at the gloating Aqualish. “It is not, O Most Heinous of Hutts,” Boba said. He swung his pack from his shoulder and stepped toward the throne. “I did as you commanded, Lord Jabba. I gave the assassin Jhordvar the choice of returning with me, or—”

## Elizabeth Hand

“Or getting away!” cried the Aqualish.

Rough laughter came from the other bounty hunters. Boba ignored them.

“Or accepting his own death,” Boba continued coolly. “He chose the latter. Unfortunately for him. But not, O Mighty Jabba, for you.”

With a flourish, Boba lifted his pack and turned it over. Jhordvar’s remains fell to the floor. The withered hands curled upward, as though trying—too late—to escape. Gasps echoed through the throne room, followed by excited murmurs.

Jabba looked at his major-domo.

With a bow, Bib Fortuna moved quickly toward the trophies. He stooped and grasped one skeletal hand. Then he turned it so that Jabba could see the gold-green amaranite ring glittering on a mummified finger.

“It is indeed Jhordvar,” said Bib Fortuna. He flashed Boba an admiring look. Then the Twi’lek yanked the ring from the assassin’s bony hand, and returned to hold it up to Jabba.

“Hmmm,” mused Jabba. He had Fortuna hold the ring up to the light and inspected it. He looked at Boba. Very slowly, Jabba’s lipless mouth parted in a smile. “Hoh hoh hoh! Come—”

Boba let his breath out in a silent whistle of relief. He took the steps toward Jabba at a near run, stopping before the throne.

“Your hand,” commanded Jabba. Boba extended his palm, and Jabba dropped the ring into it. “You will receive your usual fee, young Fett. This is a bonus. Amaranite is worth much in some parts of the galaxy.”

*But not on Tatooine*, brooded Boba, while making sure he only looked back calmly at his employer.

“Thank you, Lord Jabba,” he said. “I will take good care of it.”

Jabba stared at him as though he could read the young man’s thoughts. The Hutt’s flaccid tongue flicked at the corner of his mouth as he reached for more grubs. “You may find it useful, young Boba,” he boomed. “On your next adventure...”

Boba stared at him, trying not to let his confusion show. In the hall behind him he could hear the assembled bounty hunters whispering angrily among themselves.

“My next...?” he started.

“Yes.” Jabba gestured disdainfully at the other hunters. “You see them? Jackals! Arrak snakes! They are predators. They are good hunters—but they are not great ones. They lack vision. They lack endurance,” his voice boomed. “They lack the will to succeed.”

Boba allowed himself a small, grim smile. “Endurance I can understand,” he said.

“I know,” said Jabba. “That is why I have waited for your return. I have an important job for you. It will take many bounty hunters—but only one will be given the most rewarding task.”

“This I understand, too,” said Boba.

“These bounty hunters,” Jabba went on, pointing at the others, “they have been here for a week. Some did not have the patience to wait. They left. They will not return.”

Boba shivered at Jabba’s tone. The crime lord’s voice rose as he cried out so that all in the hall could hear him. “Return in one hour! You will receive your orders then. There will be glory for all of you—and blood for all,” he finished, his wide mouth curling in a smile. Throughout the cavernous room, the other bounty hunters cursed. Some laughed. The rest made threatening gestures and stalked away angrily.

After a few minutes only a few remained, looking hopefully at Jabba. One of them was the Aqualish.

“What are you waiting for?” Jabba bellowed at them. He turned to Bib Fortuna. “These guests do not know their manners! Perhaps they would enjoy sharing a meal with my pit beasts?”

“By all means, master,” said the Twi’lek with a nasty smile.

Boba looked over. The remaining bounty hunters hurried toward the arched doorway. The last to leave was the Aqualish. He glared back at Boba, then followed the others.

## Elizabeth Hand

“Now,” thundered Jabba from his throne. He leaned forward, his tail twitching slightly, and beckoned Boba toward him. “You have done well for a young bounty hunter.”

“Thank you, Lord Jabba,” said Boba.

“So well, in fact, that I have no more use for you here,” Jabba continued.

Boba looked at him, startled. “But you just said...?” he asked. “No more use for me?”

He swallowed, trying not to let his alarm show. *But all I want is to be a bounty hunter*, he thought. *The very best—and only the very best work for Jabba!*

“That is not what I said.” Jabba’s voice was calm, with an edge of menace. “I said I had no more use for you *here*, on Tatooine.”

Boba stared at him, hardly daring to believe his ears.

Jabba nodded. “That is right. Tomorrow you begin a new job for me, Boba—off-planet!”

## CHAPTER THREE

*Off-planet! Yes!*

Boba wanted to punch the air in excitement.

“When do I leave?” he asked.

Jabba watched him approvingly. “I am glad to see you are pleased at the prospect,” he boomed. He picked up a squishy, star-shaped glubex, unpeeled its head from its body, and ate it, slurping loudly. He held out the empty skin to Boba.

“Uh, no thanks,” said Boba.

Jabba belched and went on. “Many would be terrified at the very thought of traveling to Xagobah in these troubled times. But I think my instincts about you are correct. You do not seem afraid.”

Boba hesitated. “My father taught me that fear can be overcome,” he said at last. He felt a pang at the memory of his father, Jango Fett—the mighty bounty hunter, slain by that murderous Jedi, Mace Windu. “He always said that a good bounty hunter ought to know his prey as well as he knew himself. Knowledge is power. Fear is energy. And with power and energy, one can conquer anything. One can defeat any enemy.”

Jabba stared at him through slitted amber eyes. “Your father taught you well, Boba Fett.”

## Elizabeth Hand

“What he did not teach me, O Jabba, I have learned from you.”

Jabba’s enormous mouth opened in a bubbling laugh. He reached for the withered stalk of Jhordvar’s arm and waved it as though it were a fan. “Hoh hoh! In that case, you have learned well indeed!”

Jabba tossed Jhordvar’s arm into the shadows. “But you will need all your knowledge, young Fett,” he said. “And luck wouldn’t hurt—not where I’m sending you.”

Boba waited patiently. He knew better than to interrupt Jabba.

At this point, Jabba’s major-domo took over. “Last week a high-ranking member of the Republic Senate contacted the great Jabba. Completely confidential, of course,” the obsequious Bib Fortuna said with an evil smirk. “They want it to appear that they are working through the proper channels. They have put a bounty on the heads of many leading Separatists. Our Lord Jabba had agreed to help them hunt down these scum. Everyone knows his bounty hunters are the best,” Bib Fortuna added, gloating. “Even the Republic!”

Boba smiled. His hand moved instinctively to the blaster nestled at his hip. “So you want me to hunt them down?”

“No.” The Twiilek gestured dismissively at the empty hall. “Lord Jabba will let those others do that.”

Boba glanced at Jabba. The crime lord was watching him closely. Boba kept his expression calm. He waited as Fortuna continued. “Jabba has something much more hazardous in mind for you.”

Boba nodded. “Great!”

“Have you ever heard of a Separatist named Wat Tambor?”

“No,” said Boba.

“He is the Separatists’ Techno Union Foreman, as well as a combat engineer. A brilliant strategist. And extremely dangerous—an expert at fighting machines, and a master of defense technologies. He is also an expert at escape. The Republic captured and detained him at a high-security facility.

But several of Tambor's followers from the Techno Union freed him, with the assistance of a Clawdite shapeshifter."

"A Clawdite," repeated Boba, scowling. "I have grown to hate Clawdites."

He didn't say why—namely that a young shapeshifter had robbed him while Boba was on Aargau, trying to regain his father's fortune.

"Lord Jabba's sources inform him that Wat Tambor is now on Xagobah," said Bib Fortuna. "He has taken refuge in his fortress there. Republic troops have laid siege to his hideout, using a clone army led by a Jedi Master named Glynn-Beti."

At the word "Jedi," Boba's face grew grim. He didn't explain that he had actually met Glynn-Beti, back on the assault ship *Candaserri*. She had even shown kindness to him; she had never learned his real name or parentage. Glynn-Beti was a Bothan, cream-furred and small—less than a meter and a half in height. But she had great presence and command despite her diminutive size—the power and authority of a Jedi.

And nothing could change Boba's mind about that.

He said, "I hate the Jedi, too."

*But not Ulu Ulix, Glynn-Beti's Padawan*, Boba thought. Ulu was the one Padawan he genuinely liked.

Jabba nodded. Fortuna continued, "I know. And the Separatists supporting Wat Tambor have assembled a huge counterforce—hailfires, spider droids, the most technologically advanced battle droids anyone has ever seen. To reach Wat Tambor you will first have to get through Republic and Separatist lines—no member of the Republic forces on Xagobah must know you have this assignment."

"I understand," said Boba.

"Do you?" Jabba's mouth suddenly split into a cold smile.

Fortuna resumed speaking. "Once you have breached the Separatists' forces—if you can—you still have to enter the Citadel. Wat Tambor designed it himself. He focused all of his technological knowledge to one end: to make that fortress

## **Elizabeth Hand**

invincible. No one has ever penetrated its defenses. No one—not even a Jedi. And even if they did, inside, there are traps everywhere. Hidden doors. And there’s a rumor that Tambor is protected by something more terrible still!”

Jabba leaned forward. His huge girth shifted on his throne, like a mud slide in slow motion. “You saw those other bounty hunters, Boba. Every one of them wanted this job. Some of them would be willing to kill for it! Are you?”



## CHAPTER FOUR

“When do I leave?” asked Boba. He tried not to look impatient.

“Almost immediately.”

Jabba turned and spoke to Fortuna in a low voice. The Twi’lek listened, glancing at Boba, then gave a nod, bowed, and left.

“I have commanded that your ship be refueled and supplied,” said Jabba. “The other hunters have already received their assignments from Bib Fortuna. They will be departing soon as well. But only you will be going to Xagobah.”

Jabba reached into a vivarium. He plucked a single wuorl from the mass of froglike creatures squirming inside the tank, plopped it into his mouth, and chewed thoughtfully.

*Ugh!* thought Boba. He quickly looked down, adjusted the relay on his blaster, and waited for Jabba to finish.

“There is a small matter we still need to discuss,” Jabba said. He gave another hearty belch. “Your fee.”

“My fee?” Boba pretended to mull this over.

He knew he must choose his words very carefully. He did not want to appear too anxious, like those other bounty hunters. He must be clever, and sly. Even more clever than Jabba himself—only Jabba must never know that.

## Elizabeth Hand

“It is a very difficult bounty,” Boba said at last. “The most perilous I have ever heard of. I have been working for you for several years now, O Most Humongous of Hutts. You, more than anyone, know how loyal I am to you. And how grateful I am that you have considered me for this task, knowing that I am still young.”

Boba lowered his head. His voice was respectful; but not even Jabba the Hutt could see the determined look in the young bounty hunter’s eyes. “Lord Jabba! I will accept whatever fee you feel is appropriate.”

Jabba’s vast body seemed to balloon with delight. “Once again, a good answer! You alone show appreciation for my care! You alone I can always depend on. Therefore I will split the fee the Republic has promised me. I will keep seventy percent. The rest is yours, Boba.”

Only thirty percent! Others might laugh, or argue, but Boba knew better than that—Jabba usually kept ninety percent.

Boba bowed. “Thank you, Most Generous of Gangsters. As you say, I am still young, and learning. And when I return from this mission, I will continue to work for you. By then my apprenticeship will be over. My fee will be higher. But my loyalty will remain the same.”

Boba’s heart beat fast as he spoke these last words. He was taking a chance, and he knew it.

But being the best bounty hunter in the galaxy was all about chance. He stared unflinching at Jabba and waited for his reply.

For a moment Jabba was silent. His yellow eyes blazed.

“When you return? *When you return?*” he said at last. His body began to shake with laughter. “Hoh hoh! Don’t you mean *if* you return?” Jabba drew back upon his throne. “Go—now! Ready yourself for your adventure! *If* you return, we will discuss this further!”

“Yes, Lord Jabba,” Boba replied. With a small bow he turned and very quickly left the throne room.

*That was a close one!* he thought.

Jabba's tone and the angry look in his eyes told Boba that he had gone perhaps too far this time!

Boba went to his quarters, a small set of rooms in the easternmost tower of Jabba's sprawling palace. When he got there, he hesitated and stood before the door.

It had been several months since he had been back. He was never here for more than a few days or weeks at a time, between jobs. Still, these rooms were the closest thing he had to a home.

He knew what he would find inside. His quarters were simple, almost spartan. The rooms of a warrior, with no frills besides a small stack of holobooks at his bedside. Books on strategy, navigation, Mandalorian weaponry techniques, scouting, and hunting; ancient texts on war.

Most precious of all was the book left to him by his father. It contained his father's words and images. Along with his father's helmet, and the remnants of his father's armor, the book was Boba's most prized possession. He had learned more from that book than he had from any other.

But he had learned even more from his own experience.

Thinking about his father still made Boba sad. But he knew his father would be proud of his son. After all, he had just received a prize assignment from Jabba the Hutt!

Boba opened the door and went inside. His room was exactly as he had left it. Or was it?

"Hey..." Boba frowned.

Hadn't he left his Mandalorian helmet on board *Slave I*?

Yet here it was, in the middle of his bed. Boba glanced around the room suspiciously.

But there was no sign of anyone. The door showed no signs of forced entry. His hand hovering above his blaster, he crossed to the bed.

There was something else there, next to his father's helmet.  
A set of armor.

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At first he thought it was the body armor that had belonged to Jango—armor that Boba had longed to wear, but which was still too big for him.

“Huh,” he said. He picked up the chest-piece, molded to fit Jango’s muscular frame. “Wait a minute—something’s different.”

The body armor was smaller than his father’s. Boba held it up—and yes, it was sized to fit him. Perfectly.

He examined the armor carefully, still frowning.

“Wow,” he breathed in amazement.

There, slightly below the left side of the rib cage, a small indentation showed where long ago Jango had barely survived an assassin’s blast.

Boba whooped in delight.

It was Jango’s body armor!

“This is great!” he exclaimed aloud. Quickly he shut and locked his door. Then he changed from his customary uniform—a young Mandalorian soldier’s pale blue tunic and trousers, the black knee-high boots that had been too small for him for almost a year. “I hope this fits!”

It did—as if it had been made just for him. Blue fire-resistant pants with steel-colored armored kneepads and shinpads. An adult’s tunic, much heavier and more durable than a youth’s, with shoulder and chest armor, heavy weapons belt, wrist holsters, and protective gloves that felt like a second, sleeker skin. Last of all, Boba pulled on the boots—his father’s boots, but with newly reinforced soles and heels that could withstand temperatures hot enough to melt iron. He had just grabbed his helmet when there was a knock at the door.

“Boba?” asked a familiar voice. “It’s me, Ygabba—”

“And me, Gab’borah,” chimed in a second voice. “Can we come in?”

“Sure!”

Boba yanked the door open. In the hall stood Ygabba and Gab’borah. Both of them were grinning ear to ear.

“It fits!” cried Ygabba. “I knew it would!”

Boba stared at her. "You did this?"

"Yes! With his help." She cocked a thumb at her father. "Why do you think we were so careful to get your height measurement last time you were here? We knew you'd grow from that—and it looks like we were right!"

Boba shook his head. He looked down at his new body armor, then at Ygabba and Gab'borah.

"This is the best thing anyone has ever given me," he said. He held up his helmet. "Except for this. And this—"

He reached for his father's book, carefully slipped it into a pocket. "Ygabba. Gab'borah. How can I ever thank you?"

Gab'borah shook his head. "You saved my daughter from that horrible Neimoidian, Gilramos," he said. "I will forever be in your debt."

"And don't forget—you saved all those other kids, too, Boba," said Ygabba. She looked at him, then pointed to his helmet, grinning. "I hope you didn't mind me picking that up for you from *Slave I*. I thought you'd want to try it on with the rest of your body armor. And you know, it wasn't the first time I've held on to that helmet for you."

Boba laughed. When he first met Ygabba, she had been a street urchin, forced to steal for the evil Gilramos Libkath. And one of the things she'd tried to steal was his helmet!

"It sure wasn't," he said. "But it might be the last. Jabba is sending me on another bounty hunt."

"So soon?" said Gab'borah.

Boba nodded. "Yeah. But this is the great thing—it's my first job off-planet!"

"Awesome!" said Ygabba. Her voice held a touch of envy. "Where?"

Boba hesitated. More than anything, he wanted to tell them of his prize assignment. After all, Gab'borah and Ygabba were the closest thing Boba had to a family.

But he could not afford the risk. He was in the first rank of Jabba's bounty hunters now.

## Elizabeth Hand

And he wanted to stay there.

"I can't tell you," he said. "It would be too risky. Not just for me, but for you, too."

Ygabba looked disappointed, but her father nodded.

"We understand," he said. His voice sounded wistful, but his blue eyes shone. "We are very proud of you, Boba. Your father would be proud, too."

Gab'borah reached into the pocket of his chef's robe and withdrew a small packet. "Here. These will last a long time. Wherever you're going, you'll need food." Boba took the packet. He peeled back a corner to see what was inside.

"Gleb rations!" He made a face, then said, "I mean, thank you, Gab'borah." Gleb rations didn't taste very good, but a single small cube provided enough energy and nutrients for a day's hard work.

"We'd better go," said Ygabba. She gave Boba a wistful smile. "I have one more thing for you. Not as exciting as gleb rations, but..."

She held out a small object, about the size of Boba's hand.

"What is it?" he asked, taking the object. It was heavier than it looked, encased in a gray plasteel container.

"A surprise," said Ygabba. "Wait till you get wherever it is you're going. Then open it."

Boba nodded. "Thanks, Ygabba."

"You're welcome. I hope it helps." She grinned at Boba, pointing at his helmet. "You take care of that, too. I won't be around to watch it for you!"

Boba smiled. "Don't worry," he said, waving good-bye as the two of them turned and walked back down the hall. "I will."

## CHAPTER FIVE

Boba had been off-planet before, of course.

He had been born on rainswept Kamino, and had buried his father on Geonosis, a desert planet even more desolate than Tatooine. He had been to Aargau, where he retrieved what remained of his father's fortune and explored the planet's treacherous, mazelike Undercity. And before that he had been on a moon of Bogden, and the poisoned world of Raxus Prime. Raxus Prime was where Boba had met up with the man his father had called "The Count."

Some people knew the Count as Dooku, a leader of the Separatists. Others knew him as Tyranus. Darth Tyranus was the agent who had chosen Jango Fett as the source for the Republic's vast clone army.

Now the Republic and the Separatists were at war. Count Dooku and Tyranus were on opposing sides of the conflict.

And only Boba Fett knew that Tyranus and Dooku were the same man.

This knowledge had saved Boba's life on Aargau. This knowledge was a weapon.

Like a weapon, it gave Boba great power.

And like a weapon, it had the power to kill those who used it.

## Elizabeth Hand

In the cockpit of *Slave I*, Boba made a last-minute check that his firearms were stored and ready for use.

“Jet pack, blaster, jet pack generator, ion stunner, grappling missile...” Boba counted off his deadly array. “Dart shooter, rocket launchers, whipcord thrower...”

Jabba might be greedy and disgusting and power-hungry. But when it came to outfitting his favorite bounty hunter, he was as generous as his Gamorrean guards were stupid.

New weapons gleamed from *Slave P*’s storage bays: blaster, ionizers, plasma missiles. And, at Boba’s request, Jabba had arranged for brand-new sensor-jammers to be installed on *Slave I*, as well as a state-of-the-art interstitial stealth shield. But best of all was the shining set of Westar-34 blasters on Boba’s weapons belt.

“I’ll never let you down, Father. Not as long as I have these,” Boba murmured as he checked a blaster’s power cell cartridge.

Once the Westar-34s had belonged to Jango Fett. Now they were his son’s. The blasters had been designed by Jango, and specially made for him. Compact enough to fit in a jet pack, the weapons were cast of a nearly priceless dallorian alloy, designed to withstand furnace heat.

Boba wasn’t sure what was in store for him on Xagobah. But he was pretty sure things would heat up once he got there.

He settled behind the ship’s console and set his course for Xagobah. He glanced out the viewscreen.

“Looks like I’m not the only bounty hunter anxious to leave,” he said.

In the docking bay around him, dozens of other ships were getting ready to depart Tatooine. Astromech droids and Ughnaught mechanics were everywhere, scrambling to make last-minute adjustments to starships and speeders. In the hazy, red-tinged air above him Boba could make out more starships, flashing like falling stars. He pressed *Slave P*’s thruster igniters.

With a deafening rumble and an explosive burst of flame from its fusion reactors, *Slave I* shot from the landing bay.



“Yes!”

Boba’s heart pounded with the thrill that accompanied every new mission. Below him, the Dune Sea spread like flame across the surface of Tatooine. And like flame the brilliant red-and-orange dunes almost immediately faded into black, as *Slave I* pierced the planet’s atmosphere and headed into the vast realm of space.

Boba checked the coordinates for Xagobah. He glanced out the viewscreen and saw the usual flash and flare of planets and distant stars.

He frowned. “What’s that?”

At the bottom of the viewscreen, something glittered and darted like an asteroid. Something that shouldn’t be there.

“There’s no asteroids in this sector,” said Boba. “No recent planetary upheavals...”

Boba quickly checked *Slave I*’s flight plan. There was no sign of meteor activity. The glittering spark grew larger on the viewscreen. Boba leaned forward.

“That’s no meteor!”

Instinctively he reached for the control unit of *Slave I*’s missile deployer.

“That’s a fighter!” he cried. “And it’s tailing me!” His fingers flashed across the console. Immediately the enlarged image of a Koro-1 exodrive airspeeder filled the screen. Furiously Boba punched at the console. He needed that vehicle’s registration data...

Silvery letters filled the screen. *Andoan registry, licensed to Urzan Krag of Krag Fanodo.*

“The Aqualish,” Boba breathed. “He wanted this assignment, too. Well, he’s not going to get it!”

Before him on the viewscreen was a white-hot burst. *Slave I* shuddered as though it were starting re-entry.

“He’s firing on me!”

Immediately Boba went into attack mode. The Andoan vessel blinked from sight.

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“He has a cloaking device,” muttered Boba. “Well, so do I.”

Boba deployed *Slave P*’s sensor jammers, then activated the protose detectors. They indicated that the Andoan ship was somewhere behind him.

“You want to play hide-and-seek?” said Boba. He grasped the controls of *Slave P*’s laser cannons and fired. “Well, hide from *that*!”

The energy bolts streaked through the black emptiness outside the ship. They found their target and seemed to liquefy around it. The Andoan speeder’s outlines appeared, cloaked in a blazing plasma skin.

The Andoan vessel seemed to hover like a teardrop waiting to fall.

An instant later a blinding flare of blue-white plasma engulfed the Aqualish’s ship.

“Gotcha!” exclaimed Boba.

Backlash waves of energy from the blast pulsed around *Slave I*, then dispersed. Where the Andoan speeder had been, brilliant specks of debris floated, like a miniature asteroid field.

“What a great way to start the day!” gloated Boba. His eyes shone as he activated *Slave P*’s navigation program. He leaned forward, his fingers automatically programming the coordinates for his destination.

“Next stop—Xagobah!”

## CHAPTER SIX

Boba was not surprised that Wat Tambor had chosen Xagobah for his citadel. This entire sector was known to be a favorite of smugglers making their way between more habitable regions. Jabba had underworld contacts on various planets there.

Still, until he had received his assignment, Boba had never heard the crime lord mention Xagobah.

He had never heard *anyone* mention it.

“But there it is,” he murmured.

Dead ahead of *Slave I*, a planet shimmered into view. Boba blinked, wondering if his eyes had gone funny.

The planet seemed out of focus. Its outlines were blurred, as though a vast hand had drawn it with colored ink, then smudged it.

Yet as *Slave I* drew nearer, Boba saw that the problem was not with his eyes. The problem was with Xagobah.

The entire planet seethed with colors. Purple, violet, lavender, maroon, plum: every shade of purple Boba had ever seen, and many he could not have imagined. The colors shifted and moved above the world’s surface like an immense, restless demonsquid. Tentacles of indigo and violet spiked thousands of kilometers upward into the atmosphere, then retracted. As *Slave I* began its

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descent, Boba glimpsed jagged flashes of lightning below Xagobah's violet haze.

Atmospheric storms.

"That's not good," he said to himself.

He saw something else, too. It hovered hawk-like, safely out of reach of the lightning storms—one of the largest vehicles he had ever seen.

A Republic assault ship.

"They sure mean business," Boba said grimly. Quickly he checked to make sure *Slave P's* cloaking device was still activated. "Now—let's take a closer look."

He drew *Slave I* as close as he dared to the troopship. It was an Acclamator, one of the military transports specially built by the Republic to carry clone troops across the galaxy. Each ship held up to 16,000 clone troopers, as well as armored walkers, gunships, speeders, and ammunition supplies.

And there would be Republic command personnel on board as well—and Republic military commanders on Xagobah's surface.

"Which is where I'm headed," said Boba. "Better get there, fast!"

He took a final look at the Acclamator. Then he hit the thrusters. *Slave I* shot toward Xagobah.

Outside, streamers of purple and lavender whipped past. Boba thought about the troopship. It certainly looked like the Republic had sent an entire clone army to lay siege to Wat Tambor.

From what Boba knew about the Separatists, they would have their own army, geared to fight back.

A droid army. Battle droids, super battle droids, spider droids, the works.

Boba's grip tightened on *Slave P's* controls. He had successfully fought droids back on Tatooine, when he rescued Ygabba and the other kids from the evil Neimoidian.

But he'd never had to fight an entire army of them!

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“Good thing I have my body armor,” said Boba.

“And my blasters...”

The ship’s nav program showed he was fast approaching the surface. He still wasn’t sure what Xagobah looked like, close up.

But he knew what he would find there—

Trouble.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Boba locked *Slave I* into cruising mode. Outside, shreds of dark purple mist flew by like flocks of winged mynock. Boba watched the haze grow thicker—and darker—the closer he came to Xagobah's surface.

*I still have no idea what kind of life-forms are native to this place*, he thought. He peered through the writhing fog. It was almost impossible to see anything, which meant it would be difficult for others to see him.

"That's a good thing, too." Boba reached for his jet pack. "The Republic is after Wat Tambor. And Wat Tambor will be busy defending himself against the clone troops—and none of them will be happy to see me coming!"

He turned back to *Slave I*'s console. Outside, the mist no longer moved. Instead, it hung like a heavy, purplish curtain over everything. As *Slave I* cruised a short distance above the surface, Boba got his first glimpse of Xagobah.

And what he saw there was disgusting!

"Mushrooms?" exclaimed Boba.

Only these weren't ordinary mushrooms. They were as tall as trees; as tall as the rock formations that surrounded Jabba's fortress. He saw orange fungi shaped like towers, with long rubbery appendages dangling from them like arms. He saw entire

forests of umbrella-shaped mushrooms, yellow, crimson, poisonous green. In spots the ground was covered with a carpet of wriggling things like hair or fur. They waved and changed color as the ship passed overhead, darkening from pink to darkest violet. Some of the tallest mushrooms sported fungi like ladders crawling up their sides. Really crawling, like slugs or gigantic swollen caterpillars.

“Gross!” said Boba.

Though it was also sort of cool, in a horrible way. He stared at a huge fungi that looked like a bloated jellyfish. It pulsed and belched clouds of purple-black smoke as Boba’s ship hovered above it.

Only it wasn’t smoke, but spores.

“That’s what the fog is,” Boba realized in amazement. “Not mist, or clouds—but billions and billions of mushroom spores! I wonder if it’s safe to breathe?”

Quickly he logged into the ship’s medical computer and read the data there.

*It is recommended that you take an antidote before setting foot on Xagobah, as a precaution. Most of the fungi are harmless, but some have toxins that can be fatal if swallowed or breathed. Others can cause changes to non-native biological entities.*

“Like me?” asked Boba, as he took a small inhaler out of his med kit.

Boba breathed in the antidote, then tossed the empty inhaler.

“Changes,” he mused. “I wonder what kind of changes? Well, I’ll have plenty of time to find out—later. Right now I’m out to find Wat Tambor.”

*Slave I* was cruising well below the mushroom forest’s canopy now.

But in the distance, Boba could see something other than rubbery fungi and coiling tendrils.

Laser fire.

## Elizabeth Hand

He stared out as bolts of bright blue flame erupted through the haze of purple and black. For a moment the flares illuminated the scene below.

“There it is,” breathed Boba.

In the center of a large clearing an immense structure loomed: Wat Tambor’s fortress. It was too dim to see clearly. But Boba could make out dark slashes about 500 meters from the citadel—a series of trenches engineered by the Republic’s troops. More laser fire rose from here, streaking toward the fortress walls. Boba could just make out myriad forms moving through the shadows.

“Clone troopers,” he said aloud, preparing to land. “This is where the action is. Which means—that’s exactly where I’m going!”

Back on Tatooine, one of the first things Boba had done was arrange for his ship to be completely overhauled by Mentis Qinx. At the time, Boba had no credits to pay for the work. He’d bluffed his way into it, projecting enough confident authority that he’d fooled Qinx’s administrative droid.

And the bluff had paid off. Qinx had upgraded *Slave I*’s power cells. He had installed a series of camo covers that concealed new turbolasers and concussion missile launchers. He had upgraded the engineering console. He had even replaced the existing hardware grid with a larger one. Someday, that grid would accommodate more advanced stealth hardware.

Unfortunately, Qinx hadn’t installed it yet.

“That’ll be your next big project, Qinx,” muttered Boba.

He stared up at the vast Republic assault ship hovering just beyond the planet’s atmosphere. *Slave I*’s interstitial shield had worked beautifully out there, with the Republic’s eyes trained on the surface of Xagobah.

But would it work here on the planet itself?



He activated all the ship's auxiliary cloaking devices and began to land.

Below, the mushroom forest swayed and tossed as *Slave I* descended. Clouds of spores drifted across the viewscreens. In the near distance, flickers of blue and gold exploded through the violet haze. He had landed behind the front lines; if he'd tried to fly directly to the citadel, both Republic and Separatist forces would've been alerted to his presence. And Boba needed both stealth and surprise if he was going to capture Wat Tambor.

More laser fire.

The Republic's forces were very close.

With a shudder, *Slave I* touched down.

"Here we are," Boba muttered. A chill crept across him, but he ignored it. Facing down fear had become second nature to him. He glanced at his father's book, stowed safely beneath the console. Not long ago, Boba would have taken it with him for good luck, and to give him confidence.

But not now. Boba had developed discipline, and with that came confidence. And he had memorized every word of Jango's advice. Now Boba carried the memory of his father inside him, along with the knowledge of his own strength.

As for luck? Boba took a deep breath. *We make our own luck*, Jango had told him. *Caution, cunning, preparedness—that's what luck consists of.*

*Oh—and a great set of weapons doesn't hurt*, his father had added with a rare smile.

Thinking of Jango made Boba smile sadly.

"Well, I've got the weapons, that's for sure," he said.

He did a brisk check of his firearms, sliding a palm shooter onto one hand. With the other he checked the array of weapons on his belt.

A vibroshiv; a single CryoBan grenade that Jabba had given him as reward for an earlier success; his blasters. The Mandalorian body armor, stronger and tougher than chrysalide hide, as supple as Boba's own skin.

## Elizabeth Hand

*Man, this feels great!* he thought, flexing his arms. He checked that his Westar blasters were fully charged. *That should be enough....*

He started for the hatch, then stopped. His gaze fell upon a small object resting alongside the flight console.

Ygabba's gift.

He picked it up, feeling again how heavy it was for something so small. Carefully, he opened it.

"Whoa!" His eyes widened in delight. "A holoshroud!"

He examined it closely: compact power cell, hologram generator and projector, hologram cartridge and tuner. As he turned it, a small text doc slid out. Boba recognized Ygabba's neat handwriting.

*Boba—*

*Bet you didn't expect this! I used Jabba's hologram recorder to scan an image for you on the hologram cartridge. Seeing that'll be your next surprise!*

*The bad news is you can't check it out until you actually use it—and the power cell only lasts for two minutes. So save it for when you really need it. Can't wait to hear how it all turns out!*

*Your friend,  
Ygabba*

Boba shook his head, marveling.

"Ygabba, you definitely have the best taste in presents," he said at last. He locked the holoshroud in place on his belt. "Guess that's it..."

He was ready to go. For a moment he looked longingly at his jet pack. That would sure make it faster to get around.

But as he reached for the jet pack, he heard a burst of laser fire from outside. There was an answering volley, followed by an explosion.

## STAR WARS: A New Threat

Boba shook his head. “Too risky.”

Reluctantly he left the jet pack where it was. He adjusted his helmet so it covered his face and stepped forward, opening the airlock. For one last instant, he stopped and stared back at the interior of his ship—he hoped he’d make it back here. Then he closed the airlock and opened the outer door.

A rush of warm, marshy air surrounded him, thick with the smells of rot and stagnant water. A flare of cannon fire made the towering mushrooms shake like grass in the wind. He heard distant comm static and shouting, the scream of something that was not human.

Boba smiled. “Wat Tambor, here I come!”

His hand poised above his blaster, Boba Fett took his first step onto the surface of Xagobah—and into the unknown.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*Slave* I had landed in a small clearing in the mushroom forest. After checking that the area was safe, Boba ran quietly until he reached the edge of the clearing. He stopped and looked back.

His ship was gone.

For a moment Boba's heart stopped. "What?"

Could the Republic forces have found him so soon?

Suddenly he remembered. Jabba's interstitial shield! He laughed hoarsely. "Guess that proves the cloaking device works!"

Boba gazed to where his ship was hidden. *I'll be back as soon as I can*, he thought. *With Wat Tambor—dead or alive!*

He touched his helmet in farewell, turned and began to make his way through the forest.

"Ugh!"

Boba swatted at a thick, slimy purple-green tendril that reached for him from an overhanging branch. The tendril recoiled like a cratsch preparing to strike. A cloud of green mist puffed out from it, and a smell like rotten meat.

Boba grimaced. "Funny, Jabba didn't mention moving, stinking mushrooms!"

He activated his helmet's filtration system. As he stepped forward his boots sank into sticky ooze.

"Ugh!" Boba groaned again.

## STAR WARS: A New Threat

From the air, Xagobah's fungus-covered surface had appeared solid. But now that he stood on it, or in it, Boba saw it was about as solid as mugruebe mucus. He pulled his foot up. There was a loud belching sound, as the ground beneath sucked at his boot hungrily.

Maybe leaving the jet pack behind hadn't been such a good idea....

Before he could take another step, a deafening sound tore the air overhead, followed by a blinding burst of flame. Instinctively Boba flung himself back toward an umbrella-shaped fungus three times his height.

That was his first mistake.

"Hey!" Boba shouted.

The huge mushroom had a gash in its side, big enough to hold Boba. He thought he could hide there from whoever was firing. Instead, great slimy folds of fungus suddenly extended from the mushroom, like huge mynock wings. They covered him until he was wrapped in a slimy cocoon, with only his head free. Then they yanked him backward to the base of the fungus-tree. A putrid scent filled his nostrils. Boba's hands lashed out, struggling to free himself.

That was his second mistake.

The instant his fingers touched the rippling fungus, they were stuck fast. And the more he struggled, the worse it got. Within minutes, he was entirely stuck. He could feel his blaster at his waist, but he couldn't move to retrieve it. His fingertips grazed the handle of his vibroshiv, but he couldn't free it. He could scarcely breathe.

And that, unfortunately, seemed to be the point.

Because Boba could still see. And what he saw was that he was slowly, inescapably, being pulled toward the gash in the side of the great mushroom-tree.

Only it wasn't just a gash. And it wasn't a hole.

It was moving, opening wider and wider the closer he drew to it.

**Elizabeth Hand**

And suddenly Boba knew what it was—  
A mouth.

## CHAPTER NINE

The fungus was like some horrible hybrid of mushroom and spider. The folds enveloping Boba were like a web.

And the mouth—well, it was exactly like a mouth! Boba could smell it, the rotting scent of whatever its last meal had been. And he could see it, row upon row of crimson, razor-sharp teeth stretching deep inside the mushroom's trunk.

*Now what?*

He tried kicking again.

Nothing. He was completely immobilized. The fungal tree's mouth was only meters away now. Boba glared at it through his helmet. He couldn't move them, but still his hands clenched angrily.

*Wait a minute...*

Just beneath one hand he could feel the tip of something hard and smooth: his Stokhli spray stick. Boba had taken it from a Stokhli nomad who'd given him a hard time in Mos Eisley one day. He'd stuck it on his weapons belt and, truth to tell, he'd almost forgotten about it, despite the fact that spray sticks cost a lot of credits. It was small and slender, with a stun pad at the very bottom and spray mist cartridges a few millimeters above.

*Blllaaergghb...*

## Elizabeth Hand

A sound came from the fungal tree, a disgusting moan of pleasure that Boba interpreted as “dinnertime!”

“Not yet,” he grunted. He clenched his hand again, his fingertips grazing the spray stick. He had no way of taking aim at the fungus, no way of adjusting the spray mist net or the electrical charge it delivered. If it backfired, Boba would find himself entangled all over again, still unable to move—

Not that it would matter!

*Aaaaergghhhh!*

A pale purple tongue protruded from the mushroom’s slobbering mouth. Flecks of foul-smelling saliva splattered across Boba’s helmet. With every ounce of strength he had, Boba focused on moving his finger toward the spray stick.

Just an iota, just the merest fraction—

And—

There was a muffled report. At Boba’s side the spray stick shuddered as though it would explode—and then it did!

“Gotcha!” crowed Boba.

A shimmering mist erupted from the stick’s tip. It surrounded Boba, but it did not adhere to him. Instead it fixed itself to the slimy membrane that wrapped him like a cocoon. It formed a second web, a net strong enough to hold a charging myntor.

A powerful electrical surge pulsed through the spray mist net. *Good thing I have my helmet and body armor!* Boba thought.

As the pulsing charge stunned its prey, Boba flung himself forward. Around him the fungus membrane slackened then recoiled.

He was free!

He heard an unhappy slurping sound, then a sort of sizzling groan. The next instant he was on the ground, rolling away from the mushroom tree. He stopped himself, then clambered to his feet. His hand felt for the stun stick, disabling it.

“Well, that came in handy,” he said.

A few meters off, the mushroom tree quivered and moaned. The stun-net covered its mouth. Its pale tongue poked



pathetically at the webbing, while above it the tree's umbrella crown drooped. "Only a great bounty hunter could have pulled that off!" boasted Boba as he brushed himself off. "And—"

He stiffened. His hand hovered above his blaster as he turned, as slowly as he dared, to face the creature behind him.

"And only a fool would have approached a flimmel tree during feeding hours," it said coolly.

"Who are you?" demanded Boba.

But he might have asked, *What are you?*

The creature regarded him calmly. It was reptilian, a little taller than Boba and with long, muscular arms and legs clad in what looked like a camo uniform of purple and gray. Its large, almond-shaped eyes were coldly intelligent, its lipless mouth curved in a slight smile to reveal sharp teeth. Its wiry forearms were curled around a blaster rifle.

And the blaster was pointed right at Boba Fett.

## CHAPTER TEN

“Who am I?” repeated the creature. “On Xagobah, we like to ask questions before we answer them. But—”

The roaring whine of a missile passed overhead. Boba flinched. A moment later the missile impacted a short distance away, sending him falling to his knees. He looked up to see the creature staring down at him, still eerily calm.

“But we seem to find ourselves on the same side for the moment,” the creature went on, as though nothing had happened. The muzzle of its blaster remained fixed on Boba as it motioned for him to get up.

“And what side is that?” snapped Boba.

“The wrong one,” retorted the creature, as another missile whizzed overhead. “Quickly!”

It jammed the blaster rifle into Boba’s side, gesturing toward the mushroom forest.

“No way!” Boba shook his head. “I’ve already made dinner plans, and they don’t include being the main course!”

The creature made a low growling sound. Boba stiffened, then realized the thing was laughing. “Dinner plans!” it repeated. “That is good! Feeding time is over—” It poked him again, harder this time. Reluctantly, Boba began moving toward the fungi forest.

"The flimmel trees share an underground root system," the creature continued. "They are thousands of years old, and when one is hurt, they all suffer. And that one was very badly hurt!"

It indicated the flimmel tree that Boba had escaped from. Its canopy had retracted completely. It looked like a closed—and very mournful—umbrella.

"None of them will be hungry for a little while." The creature shot Boba an admiring glance. "That was a good jolt you gave it."

"Thanks," said Boba. He regarded the creature warily. But its own expression as it stared back at him was mostly curious. Boba positioned his hand so that it was near his blaster.

*What's the best way to deal with this thing—whatever it is?* he wondered.

The alien was armed, but so was Boba. He could blast it—but what if there were others nearby?

He looked at the alien from the corner of his eye. As he did, the echo of laser fire made the surrounding mushroom forest shake as though a gale tore through it.

*I don't even know what side of the conflict it's on,* Boba brooded.

A sudden staccato burst of comm static made up his mind.

*That was way too close,* Boba thought. And he could tell from a glance at the alien that it felt the same way. Boba decided to take matters into his own hands. He adjusted his helmet, squaring his shoulders to make himself seem as tall as possible.

"We better find shelter—fast," he said.

To his surprise, the alien nodded. "This way," it said, turning to lope into the forest. Boba followed, trying not to trip over clumps of dimly glowing mushrooms like tiny, domed cities scattered underfoot. He kept his hand on his weapon, scanning the shadowy fungus-growth around him for signs of an ambush.

Thankfully, he saw nothing, save the clusters of gleaming mushrooms and the occasional flimmel tree. They ran for several minutes. A second burst of comm static sounded—much closer

## Elizabeth Hand

this time. Boba could even make out words: *Tambor Angalarra, Ulu, Suspect Ambush...*

Suspect ambush. Boba's grip on his blaster tightened. Scant meters ahead his reptilian guide paused in front of an enormous mushroom tree the color of demonsquid ink. Like the flimmel tree, it was topped by a parasol-shaped crown. Unlike the flimmel tree, this one had wobbly limbs protruding from it. They reminded Boba of the spokes of a wheel—if the spokes had started to melt.

"This way!" hissed the alien. It made a running leap and nimbly swung its clawed forearms over the lowest branch. The entire fungus seemed about to keel over. Almost immediately the plant straightened, its limbs coiling and uncoiling like fingers.

"Hurry!" the alien called urgently. "Come here!"

Boba stared up at it. Its lidless jade-green eyes stared back. Then it turned and began clambering farther up the fungus stalk. As it did it made a soft clicking sound, as though it were talking to the mushroom.

The entire tree shuddered as a low rumbling sound shook the air.

"Uh, thanks, but no thanks!" Boba yelped. He started to back away. Before he could move, the tree's lowest branch snaked toward him. It looped itself around his waist, firmly but gently; then quick as lightning pulled him into the air.

*Kafloom!*

Fragments of dirt and shattered fungus pelted him. Boba stared at the ground in horror. Where he had stood, there yawned a mortar hole the size of a speeder. Flickers of flame ran around its perimeter. He smelled the ozone stink of a pulse grenade.

"That was way too close!" exclaimed Boba. Beside him the alien nodded.

"Indeed," it said.

Boba blinked. For the first time he realized where he was: halfway up a huge fungus, with an armed and possibly hungry

reptile next to him. He was outnumbered, at least for the moment.

*Better play dumb*, he thought.

“Uh, I know you don’t like to answer questions—but can you tell me exactly what’s going on?”

The alien regarded him with its calm, intelligent eyes. It looked him up and down, taking in his Mandalorian body armor and helmet, his weapons. One of its clawed hands absently stroked the stalk of the fungus tree.

After a moment it spoke—but not in answer to Boba’s question. It gave a series of clicks and growls, seemingly directed to the tree. The tree responded by extending a long slender tendril toward Boba’s head.

*Ulp!* he thought, but stood his ground. The tendril touched his helmet, then his chest. It remained there, pressed against the smooth body armor. Boba could feel his heart pounding. After a moment he realized the tree could feel it, too.

*It’s checking me out!*

Boba felt a sneaking admiration. The alien reptile looked at Boba and nodded. Its mouth parted in a razor-toothed smile.

“The fungus has a primitive sensory system that responds to heat and motion. It detects an elevated heart rate. Your garb indicates you are a warrior and, I suspect, a mercenary one intending to attack me. I am not a warrior.”

The alien leaned against the fungus stalk. Its jade eyes grew clouded. “But I have learned to bear weapons, as you see. My name is Xeran. I am a Xamster. My family has been bound to this malvil-tree, Malubi, for one thousand turns of Xagobah. Once hundreds of us lived here and harvested Malubi’s spores. Now only I remain.”

Xeran’s voice grew sad. “War has come to Xagobah. Though we wanted no part of it, still war claimed us. Many of my people have been forced to serve one side or the other. Many others fled, only to be shot in flight. Our malvil-trees are dying of neglect and loneliness. And now I am caught between two

## Elizabeth Hand

armies—” It lifted one clawed hand and pointed. “There. Can you see them?”

Boba strained, but even adjusting his helmet’s focus didn’t help. “No,” he replied.

The alien made another series of clicks. The fungus tree—Malubi—extended another tendril. This one was thicker and less rubbery. The alien hopped onto it, then motioned for Boba to do the same. He did, and the alien grasped him as the tendril bore them up, up, up, until they were at Malubi’s very top.

“Wow,” breathed Boba in amazement.

Up here they were above the velvety haze of purple spores. Boba could see the canopy of the mushroom forest waving gently beneath. He could see the little clearing where he had left *Slave I*, though of course his ship was invisible to him behind its cloaking device.

And—

Boba’s breath caught in his throat. He grasped tightly at Malubi’s rubbery appendage. He was glad Xeran could not see his face behind his Mandalorian helmet. Because the top of the malvil-tree also gave him a clear and terrifying view of what he had come here for.

From the air, the Republic’s trenches had looked like slashes in the ground. Now Boba saw how carefully constructed they were. Each held a line of thirty or so clone troopers, heavily armed. Waves of fire erupted from the trenches, arching through the air toward the fortress. With each bombast, a group of clone troopers would charge from the trenches—

Only to be met by an opposing charge of droids!

Boba whistled. The Republic’s forces were impressive—he figured there were hundreds, maybe a thousand, clone troopers arrayed on the battle field below. But the citadel was so well-defended that Boba could not suppress a gasp.

“Jabba was right about Wat Tambor,” he muttered. *A master of defense technologies*, the gangster had said of him; and now Boba could see how true that was. Through the haze of spores and

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laser fire, Boba got his first glimpse of the Separatist's droid army: lines of battle droids marching relentlessly, tirelessly, toward the clone troopers to breach the Republic's lines.

That looked bad enough. But what made Boba's hand tighten on his blaster wasn't the clashing armies.

For the first time, he could clearly see Wat Tambor's citadel.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

“So that’s it,” murmured Boba.

“Yes,” said Xeran. “The Mazariyan Citadel. The cause of all my troubles.”

“And the beginning of mine,” Boba replied, trying not to shiver.

Mazariyan rose from the planet’s surface, unimaginably immense, a looming dull black. Its sides were stepped, like the sides of an ancient pyramid of Yavin. But even from this distance Boba could tell that the edifice was not just a building.

The dull black, smooth surface seemed to pulse with life. Flickers of energylike lightning ran up and down its sides. On the levels above, shining black spines protruded. The spines were twice the length of Boba’s body and as sharp as javelins. He could see where dark shapes had been impaled upon them. Even as he watched, one of the spines began to slowly retract, like a machine. Boba watched in horror as a limp form slid from it, falling and bouncing down the fortress’s side.

“The tyrant who is holed up there has twisted the evolution of Xagobah’s life-forms,” said Xeran. His tone was steady, but Boba saw that the alien’s face was strained. “He has taken fungus that were benign, feeding only on bacteria. He has taken our gentle



malvil-trees. He has bio-engineered them so that they are now perverted and kill things without feeding on them.”

“Things like humanoids,” said Boba in a low voice.

“That is correct,” agreed Xeran. “And Xamsters.”

“What is this tyrant’s name?” asked Boba.

But he already knew what the answer would be.

“Wat Tambor,” said Xeran. “He is evil. And as you can see, he has brought evil to us—”

Xeran pointed to where a dark mass stretched about five hundred meters from the citadel in its long shadow. “Those are just some of the Republic’s troops gathered there. They have laid siege for weeks now. No matter how many arrive, few are able to gain entrance. And when they do, we hear rumor of what they find inside. Wat Tambor’s command of technology has made him ruthless. There are no prisoners inside his citadel. And no survivors.”

Boba looked back at Mazariyan. He found he could not take his eyes from the sight, horrible as it was. “The Republic’s using clone troopers,” he said, more to himself than Xeran.

“Yes. Sometimes the Republic has forced my people to fight, paying them well. Yet the Republic has lost many non-clone fighters. Fighters they could not afford to lose. So their chiefs have sent in a Jedi General named Glynn-Beti to lead their forces.”

Boba’s eyes grew cold and hard. “Glynn-Beti?”

He didn’t speak his thought: *She’s the Jedi who Jabba told me about.*

“Yes. Glynn-Beti is a Jedi Master, and a fearless warrior. Also a shrewd one.”

“She can’t be that shrewd,” said Boba. He smiled coldly. “Other wise her troops would have already captured Wat Tambor and taken the citadel.”

To Boba’s surprise, the reptilian alien once more made the growling sound that passed for Xamster laughter.

## Elizabeth Hand

“That is very amusing!” Xeran’s jade-green eyes fixed on Boba. “It is a rare gift, to be able to find amusement when faced with danger. Or death.”

He peered at Boba more closely. “You have not told me your name, stranger, or your business here. And I will not ask you. I suspect we share a common enemy. And if that is the case, it is best I do not know your intent. That way I cannot betray you.”

Boba nodded. “Thank you,” he said.

“Though I can, perhaps, help you.” Xeran glanced at Boba’s weapons belt. “You are already well-armed. Better armed than I am,” he said, and patted his own blaster. “My weapon came from a trooper I was forced to slay in self-defense. He would have harmed Malubi.”

The Xamster stroked the malvil tree. “No, stranger. I do not think I can offer you better weapons. But I can offer you advice.

“All of this territory is disputed, with battles erupting at anytime.” Xeran pointed to the battlefield below them. “Your only hope of approaching the citadel is to come down from the north—that is the far side, there.”

Boba’s heart sank. “There are a thousand clone troopers between here and there!” He patted his blaster, then shook his head. “But I have no other choice, so—” He started to climb down.

“Wait.” Xeran’s cool scaly hand gently restrained him. “You may not have a choice. But you do have a means of approaching without being seen.”

The Xamster turned. Standing on tiptoe, he extended his claws to pluck a dark purple globe from the malvil-tree’s stalk. As he did, a small puff of violet smoke emerged from the globe, then disappeared. Once more Boba felt the malvil-tree tremble, then grow still.

“This globe contains Malubi’s spores,” explained Xeran. “The spores are harmless in themselves. Yet they are not useless. They act as a powerful camouflage agent. Organic life-forms cannot see through the haze produced by the spores. Neither can the

droids—the spores reflect light too high on the spectrum for the droids to register through their optics. Wat Tambor has exploited the spores for his own purposes, to camouflage his vessels. But when the spores are carried by the wind, they act as chemical messengers between the trees.”

Xeran’s lipless mouth curved in a smile to reveal white razorlike teeth. He held up a small pouch, opened it, and took a pinch of what looked like lavender powder between his claws.

“Here,” he said, gesturing at Boba’s hand. “Take this. Put it into your eyes, beneath your helmet. It will enable you to see through the haze.”

Boba held out his gloved hand. Xeran dropped a small amount of the lavender powder into his palm. Boba stared at it, then at the Xamster.

Could Xeran be trusted?

Boba hesitated. He had learned over the last few years to trust his instincts—one of a bounty hunter’s most powerful assets.

And his instincts told him now that Xeran was telling the truth.

“Thanks,” Boba said. He turned away, momentarily raising his helmet. He tilted his head back, and let a few grains of the powder fall into his eyes. He felt a faint prickling, but that was all. He blinked, lowered his helmet, and turned back to Xeran.

The Xamster nodded approvingly. “The effect is not permanent. But it may help you. And here—”

He held out a small purple orb. “Take this globe with you. Malubi has already imprinted you as one who means us no harm. The other malvil-trees will recognize you. They will not harm you. But if you have need of camouflage, crush this globe. The spores will be released.”

Boba took the globe. “Thank you,” he said. Carefully he slipped it into his utility pouch.

“Something else I will tell you,” added Xeran. “There is a fungus we call Xabar. It has many small tentacles. It is a very deep purple in color, with brilliant red tips. Wat Tambor has

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taken this fungus as well and made it into a weapon. Its tentacles release a toxin. The toxin causes paralysis. Not permanent, fortunately. But very effective. Anyone who comes into contact with it is immobilized. Completely. Consciousness remains, but not the ability to move.”

“Thank you,” said Boba. “I will remember.”

From somewhere beneath them came a burst of laser fire.

“I have to go now,” said Boba. He looked down at the battlefield that stretched between him and Wat Tambor’s living citadel. Then he turned to Xeran. “I owe you one, Xeran. Thanks again.”

The Xamster nodded solemnly. Its jade-green eyes narrowed, and it smiled. “You do not need to thank me. When you destroy our shared enemy, do so in the memory of my malvil. That will be thanks enough for me. And for Malubi,” he added.

Boba smiled. As he did, one of the malvil-tree’s tentacle branches snaked around him. Very gently it lifted Boba, then slowly brought him to the ground.

“I will not forget!” Boba called back as Xeran waved at him. “For Malubi!”

“For Malubi!” Xeran echoed.

Lifting one clawed hand in farewell, the alien slipped back into the violet shadows of his malvil-tree.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

A hundred meters up in Malubi's violet canopy, Xagobah had for a little while seemed a quiet, even peaceful, place.

That peace was shattered as soon as Boba's feet touched the ground.

"Captain! Intruder in your sector!" a voice shouted from only a few meters off.

His father's voice.

For an instant Boba froze. Then brilliant blue flame exploded, close enough that he could feel its heat through his body armor.

"Whoa!"

With a muffled shout Boba dove for the underbrush.

The voice shouted again. "Captain! Did we score a hit?"

Boba crouched beneath an overhanging net of webbed fungi. He peered out and saw a figure stalking into the clearing.

His father's figure, cloaked in the gleaming, gray-white body armor and mask of the Republic army.

A clone trooper.

"Captain, do you copy?"

Boba tried not to breathe as the trooper moved with sure, heavy steps, until he was just an arm's length from where Boba was hidden. He was close enough that Boba could clearly see the back of his helmet.

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Boba had seen the clones many times before, of course. He could remember them being raised by the thousands on Kamino. And he had met a young clone, 9779, on Aargau. Clones were known mainly by their numerical designation.

Could this be 9779, grown to his full size?

The thought made Boba feel slightly sick. He forced it from his mind, and stared from the shadows at the trooper. Like all the clones, the captain had his father's build. It also had Jango's strength. Boba could tell from how easily it hefted its weapon, a DC-15 rifle that would have made Boba's arm ache.

"Checking it out," the clone answered into its comlink. "I see no sign of an intruder. Hold your fire."

It gave one more look around the clearing. Then it slid its rifle back into an upright position, turned, and strode off.

"Whew." Boba let his breath out in relief. That was close!

He waited until the clone trooper was just a pale fleck among the mushroom trees. Then Boba began to follow it. He kept within the shadows of the overhanging fungus, moving swiftly and stealthily as a stalking cratsch.

Now and then a slender mushroom stalk would reach out tentatively to brush against his helmet, or touch his hand. Whenever this happened Boba would pause, holding his breath.

But it seemed as though Malubi's spores must have warned the other fungus of Boba's coming. Their tendrils would only touch him. Then they would withdraw. Sometimes a small puff of purple would appear above him. Then he would see other mushroom trees ahead of him swaying gently.

*Thanks, Xeran,* Boba thought. *And Malubi.*

He patted the trunk of a very young malvil-tree, then stopped.

In front of him, the mushroom forest abruptly ended. Beyond it, the ground looked scorched. When he looked up he saw the hovering shadows of Republic ships, like black clouds in the purple mist. When he looked down, he saw black circles where transport vehicles had landed and departed. In other places, there were holes and small craters left by exploding weaponry.

Smoking bits of vegetation were elsewhere. And other things, too. Things Boba wished he hadn't seen.

For reassurance he made sure the purple globe was still in his pocket. His hand tightened on his blaster.

He waited, trying to figure out what to do next. There was no point running out into the middle of a battle. *Nine-tenths of any bounty hunter's success is proper planning*, Jango had always told him.

"So all I need is a plan," Boba muttered.

He squinted through the haze of smoke and spores. From here he had a clearer view of Wat Tambor's citadel.

It sure didn't look any better. It was well-guarded, for one thing. In addition to the gigantic black spines that protruded from the fortress, there were droids patrolling its perimeter.

*Battle droids*, Boba noted grimly. He counted thirty—not enough to fight a war, but more than enough to keep intruders at bay.

There were other droids, too. Crablike defense droids swarmed around a triangular opening that seemed to be Mazariyan's entrance. He saw several hulking modified super battle droids and mounted laser towers.

And, hovering above the peak of Wat Tambor's fortress, a great, dark, shapeless mass. It was like a purplish-black thunderhead or a huge amoeba, floating over the battlefield.

"What's that?" Boba adjusted the focus on his helmet, then blinked, feeling a faint prickling behind his eyes as the form above him took on more solid outlines.

Xeran's spores were working. Suddenly he could see clearly. And what he saw was that the massive shape was not a cloud.

It was a fleet of Separatist fighters, cloaked by the spore-haze. As Boba watched, one of the droid-commanded fighters fired upon the Republic's assault lines. A spurt of flame exploded from one of the trenches.

A direct hit!

Boba steadied himself as the impact shuddered through the ground like an earthquake. He looked up again, and this time

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could make out something else—a darker, misshapen silhouette that hung directly above the citadel's peak. Droids swarmed around it, loading it. With a shock, Boba suddenly realized what the huge shadowy object was.

A ramship.

Boba shook his head in dismayed disbelief. Robot ramships were manufactured in the most notorious reaches of the Outer Rim. They were designed and outfitted by criminal techs—

But wasn't that exactly what Wat Tambor was?

A ramship had no organic crew. It used the hull of an abandoned—probably stolen—warship, with enough firepower to destroy a huge starship in a single explosion. The entire vessel was nothing but a massive bomb, piloted by a kamikaze robotic drone with no goal except destruction.

In this case, the Republic's destruction.

Boba craned his head back. His eyes tried to pierce the violet haze of Xagobah's atmosphere.

Somewhere up there was a Republic troopship. And while Boba had no love for the Republic, at the moment, they shared a common enemy.

Wat Tambor.

And that ramship was Wat Tambor's vessel.

*The enemy of my enemy is my friend*, Jango had once told his son. Boba had been too young then to understand those words. They sounded like a puzzle.

A puzzle he had just solved.

He saw clone troopers just within the borders of the mushroom forest. The Jedi General Glynn-Beti would be there somewhere, acting as commander. Presumably there were other Jedi as well, fighting as part of the Republic forces.

But he didn't see any life-forms, human or alien, defending Mazariyan. No Xamsters; no humans. Not even any mercenaries from lawless places like Carratos or Ord Mantell.

Only droids.



## STAR WARS: A New Threat

*He's going to have that ramship smash into the Republic troopship!* Boba sucked in his breath with excitement. *Wat Tambor thinks that will end the siege—and it will!*

Boba looked around furtively, thinking fast.

If Wat Tambor's vast flying bomb struck the troopship, it would destroy the Republic's chances of capturing the dangerous Separatist.

It would also destroy Boba's chances of capturing Wat Tambor.

Which meant it would destroy Boba's future as Jabba's favorite bounty hunter!

*Can't have that happen!* Boba thought.

But what if the ramship could somehow be commandeered into destroying Wat Tambor's citadel—and with it, Wat Tambor?

*Two can play this game,* thought Boba. He crouched in the shadows at the edge of the mushroom forest. He stared up at Mazariyan.

*Two can play this game—but only one can win. And that one will be—me!*

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

So now he had a plan. All he needed was a way to use it.

*My jet pack's no good,* he thought with regret. *Not enough strength or speed to go up against a ramship. Gotta try to find a vehicle...a speeder would be nice...* Boba scanned the area surrounding Wat Tambor's fortress. He knew that Mazariyan was well-guarded by droids.

But Wat Tambor was not a droid. And surely not all of his guards or accomplices were droids. They would have used some form of transport to get here....

"Yeah," Boba whispered. "And that's exactly what I need."

He started to run along the edges of the forest. He kept a close eye on Mazariyan, but saw nothing he could steal—er, use.

But as he circled closer to the area behind the fortress, things began to look more promising. The Republic seemed to have concentrated its forces near the citadel's entrance. This back area was void of siege trenches. There were crates and cartons of supplies here, along with piles of twisted metal and plasteel. He saw demo droids and wrecker droids, a load-lifter piling big boxes near an opening. A single security drone appeared to be monitoring them. But it was an older model, and seemed to be busy scanning the area closest to the citadel's main entrance.

*This must be a freight entrance back here,* thought Boba. He hesitated and looked for signs of hidden Republic forces, but saw

none. He might be able to dodge the security drone and clear the freight entrance.

*I could try to get in that way. But what would I do once I actually got inside?*

He hadn't worked out that part of his plan—yet.

*Later*, he thought. Quickly he turned and continued to circle the fortress, searching.

And then he saw it—he almost stepped on it! Camouflaged with torn mushroom fronds and malvil-limbs, it was so rusty and battered that it blended right in.

A swoop bike.

Boba looked around the mushroom forest furtively. But if there were clone troopers nearby, they were being even more stealthy than he was: He saw no one. He looked up.

And yes, the ramship was still there, like a volcanic cloud hanging above Mazariyan. The droids loading it were obviously close enough to see through the haze. Boba glanced back at the worker droids on the ground. The security drone was gone—it must have continued on its own circuit of the fortress.

And those other droids were all labor units. None of them would be programmed for surveillance or security.

“It’s now or never,” Boba muttered. He paused beside the swoop bike, looking over his shoulder. Then he shoved aside the dried-up mushrooms and jumped on. “And I say—now.”

For one heart-stopping moment, he thought it wouldn’t start. Then it sputtered and coughed. Finally, with a low buzzing sound it lurched forward.

*Someone’s modified it so that any sound is muffled*, Boba noted approvingly. He leaned over the controls and pulled up on the throttle. The swoop shot up through the malvil-trees. Not as fast as Boba would have liked—whoever did the modifications obviously preferred stealth over speed.

*Maybe they know something I don’t*, he thought, and looked around. The worker droids were still laboring mindlessly by the freight entrance. Boba adjusted his helmet, increasing the focus

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until he could just glimpse the front of the citadel. Nothing new there, either. Above the citadel's peak, the ramship hovered in place. Boba swung his swoop around, then brought it up to full throttle. Fungus fronds lashed at his helmet as he flew up, up. When he hovered just below the canopy of the forest, he turned the swoop and started to cruise in a careful circuit.

*Might as well do a little recon of my own,* he thought. *That clone trooper came from someplace.*

But where?

In a minute he had his answer. Not too distant from Wat Tambor's citadel, something moved.

Something big—something really big!

A Republic All Terrain-Tactical Enforcer!

“Man, they mean business,” muttered Boba. That AT-TE would be loaded with more clone troopers—dozens of them—not to mention some serious firepower.

There was no way he could commandeer an AT-TE, of course. But where there were incoming clone troopers, there would be Jedi nearby to command them. They would have vehicles of their own—gunships, starfighters, maybe even airspeeders.

*If I can get my hands on an airspeeder, I might be able to decoy that ramship back toward Mazariyan. The ramship doesn't move very fast—but in a speeder, I could! Then I could reach Slave I and get out of here—back to Jabba to claim my bounty!*

He angled closer to the AT-TE, being careful to stay out of sight. There were several smaller vehicles accompanying the walker—and, in the distance, more AT-TEs.

*That's more like it,* Boba thought with grim satisfaction.

Things might not be so bleak for the Republic, after all. He adjusted the long-range focus on his helmet, until he could make out even more shadowy shapes far behind the approaching AT-TEs. Gunships, each carrying a payload of still more troops and walkers.

## STAR WARS: A New Threat

And, sure enough, there were speeders, too—and a starfighter.

“That’ll be Glynn-Beti,” said Boba. He scowled, but brought the swoop down lower to get a better look. As he did, something flashed past him—

Another swoop!

“Huh?” For a second, Boba was too startled to do anything. Then he grabbed his blaster.

But whoever was on the swoop wasn’t intent on catching Boba. He was heading for the citadel.

But not just the citadel. As Boba watched in amazement, he realized that he wasn’t the only one who’d been coming up with a plan.

The swoop was flying up—straight toward Wat ‘Tambor’s ramship!

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Great minds think alike!” Ygabba used to tell Boba, joking.

But right now, watching the other swoop flying at the ramship, Boba thought maybe this particular idea hadn’t been such a great one. The swoop looked like a squir-mite attacking a sandcrawler.

“He’s doomed,” Boba groaned.

He’d had only a glimpse of the person flying it. But a glimpse was all he needed to recognize him.

Ulu Ulix!

Boba had met the young alien back on the *Candaserri*. Of course, Ulu hadn’t known Boba by his real name—Boba had called himself Teff, and had said he was an orphan from Raxus Prime. He’d guessed Ulu was about the same age as he was, though Ulu had horns and three eyes. They’d been friendly—well, as friendly as Boba could be to anyone back on the *Candaserri*.

*He’d never recognize me now*, Boba thought with pride. *Not with my Mandalorian helmet on, and my body armor.*

As Boba watched Ulu’s swoop approach the ramship, he remembered the other thing about the three-eyed alien.

Ulu Ulix was a Padawan, a Jedi apprentice—and his Jedi Master was Glynn-Beti!

## STAR WARS: A New Threat

Quickly Boba looked back to where the AT-TE was moving in the forest. A starfighter kept pace with it, high above the tops of violet malvil-trees. If Glynn-Beti was in that fighter, she must suspect the ramship was headed for the Republic's assault ship. But did she know her Padawan was headed for the ramship?

Boba wondered if Glynn-Beti was crazy—or if Ulu was.

He didn't get to wonder long.

*KA-FLOOOSHH!*

Meters from where Boba's swoop hovered, a malvil-tree exploded. There was a second flash of blue flame. Boba was spattered with purple gunk.

He wiped fungus goo from his helmet, yanked on the throttle, and swerved away from the forest. He needed a better view of what was happening.

What he saw wasn't good, at least not for the Padawan. The sentry droids had spotted Ulu Ulix!

Boba's swoop shuddered as another burst of flame struck a giant mushroom not far off.

*BLAM!*

The mushroom exploded. Fiery blobs of fungus flew everywhere, setting other trees aflame. The droids were firing! Boba's swoop shot straight up, safely out of range. He was close to the citadel now—too close, probably—but the droids weren't firing on Boba.

At least, not yet. Boba frowned. What—who—were they after? He risked bringing his swoop down lower, and nearer to the fortress. From here he had a clear view of the droids below, laser fire crisscrossing the air as the Republic's troops began to counterattack.

But the droids weren't firing on the Republic troops.

Their target was Ulu Ulix.

Boba swerved abruptly as a blast tore the air just meters away. When he looked back, he saw the ramship give a sudden surge upward.

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“They’ve released the ramship!” he exclaimed, just as the other swoop suddenly shot toward the massive vessel. Boba waited for a volley of fire from the ramship to destroy the swoop.

But the ramship didn’t alter its swift course one meter. Instead it sped upward, oblivious to Ulu Ulix pursuing it.

And why should that surprise Boba? The ramship had a drone-mind. Nothing could cause it to alter its course. Attempting to lure or attack it had obviously been a really, really bad idea.

*That could have been me,* Boba thought.

He watched grimly as Ulu’s swoop dipped and swerved clumsily. The alien was trying to avoid the barrage of fire from below. But his swoop didn’t seem to have any more thrust than Boba’s.

“Still, he *could* fly it better,” Boba said.

He clung tightly to his swoop, flying it closer still to the citadel’s black peak, and glanced back into the forest.

The convoy of AT-TEs had stopped at the very edge of the clearing. The speeders were gone, and the starfighter. Boba’s jaw clenched.

*Glynn-Beti doesn’t even care that her Padawan is under fire. She’s too concerned that her own attempt to attack W’at Tambor’s citadel will be affected!*

*Typical Jedi arrogance,* thought Boba angrily. He looked out to where Ulu Ulix’s swoop swung dizzily around the top of Mazariyan. With a sudden *BOOM*, the three-eyed alien’s vehicle was engulfed in black smoke. Sparks flew from it. There was a terrified cry.

And Boba watched in horror as a small figure tumbled into the air—and plummeted straight toward the waiting spines of Mazariyan!



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Boba had no time to think. He yanked back on the throttle. At the same time he opened the stop to feed it as much fuel as possible. With a garbled roar, the swoop shot forward. Laser fire and explosions rocked the air around Boba. Below him, the spines waited.

“Master...help...!”

A cry echoed above the sound of laser fire. Boba leaned forward as far as he could, arms outstretched. His swoop raced toward the shining black pinnacle of Mazariyan. One huge, curved spine thrust upward. It positioned itself to impale the small form falling like a stone.

Boba’s swoop dipped as he reached out. With a groan, something heavy crashed onto the front of the swoop. Boba swerved away from Mazariyan.

“Th-thanks!” Ulu Ulix blinked. He kept a tight hold on the swoop’s fuel tank. His three large eyes stared gratefully at Boba. “I thought I was dead back there!”

“Well, there’s still a chance you might be!” Boba shouted over the thunder of crossfire. “Keep your head low—”

*BLAM!*

Laser fire ripped past them. Boba wrestled his blaster from his belt. He turned and fired in the general direction of the sentry

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droids. Then he glanced down. Battle droids were everywhere now. Some were still firing up at Boba. But most had bigger targets in their sights.

With a deafening rumble, the first of the AT-TEs had drawn up at the edge of the clearing. Its hold opened, and a wide gangway swung down. More than a dozen clone troopers came running out, blasters firing. There was the whoosh and roar of battle droids rushing from hidden entrances in the citadel. They marched in formation toward the Republic's troops. Bolts of pure energy zoomed toward the clones. Wat Tambor's fortress glowed like the sun as laser fire rippled up and down its sides.

Ulu Ulix's three eyes widened as he stared at the carnage below.

"Wow," he breathed.

The attack on Mazariyan had begun.

"Keep your head down!" Boba commanded. He abruptly swung the swoop to the left.

A blinding burst of energy exploded behind them. Boba cut back on the throttle. The swoop dropped sickeningly before he pulled it out of the dive.

He yelled, "We've got to get out of here, fast!"

"There!" gasped Ulu. He pointed to where another AT-TE waited. It was surrounded by a squad of heavily armed clone sentries. "General Glynn-Beti!"

Boba squinted through the thick smoke. "Where?"

"She's standing by the transport—see? She should be in her speeder, keeping track of the battle. I guess she was worried about me. Boy, she looks really, really mad."

Ulu Ulix gulped. Boba looked at him. He couldn't help grinning inside his helmet. "Mad?"

"Yeah...the siege was ready to begin, anyway, but..."

The three-eyed alien looked back to where his swoop lay. It was now a heap of smoldering wreckage. It was surrounded by battle droids who were busy firing on the Republic's troops.

## STAR WARS: A New Threat

“But maybe the siege started a little earlier than scheduled?” Boba finished Ulu’s sentence for him.

The alien nodded miserably. “Yeah. Something like that.”

Boba steered the swoop to where Glynn-Beti stood. He glanced at Ulu Ulix. It was weird to think that the horned alien didn’t recognize him in his helmet and body armor. Weird, but good.

*I was more of a kid back then,* Boba thought proudly. *But now I’m a real bounty hunter.*

The swoop approached the edge of the forest. The sentries guarding the AT-TE snapped to attention. They stared up at Boba. They raised their weapons. They were ready to fire—

“Get Glynn-Beti’s attention!” Boba shouted at Ulu Ulix over the roar of battle. “Other wise we’re dead!”

“Master!” yelled Ulu. “Master, here—!”

On the ground, Master Glynn-Beti looked up. She was small and slender, with a vaguely feline face crowned by flowing reddish hair. Even from this distance, Boba could sense the power she held.

A Jedi’s power.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“Ulu Ulix!” The Jedi’s voice rang out sharply over the din. She sounded angry, but also relieved. She turned to the clone sentries. “Hold your fire!”

Boba angled the swoop down to within a few meters of the AT-TE. It landed with a bump. Ulu clambered off. He smoothed the folds of his Padawan’s robe. Then he looked at Boba.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” said the three-horned alien. “I don’t even know your name. Although there *is* something familiar about you....”

Ulu frowned slightly, thinking. Boba said nothing. He felt light-years older than Ulu. Light-years older than he had been when they first met.

Fortunately he didn’t need to say anything. Because General Glynn-Beti was bustling toward them now. And she looked like she had plenty to say.

“Ulu! What were you thinking?” She glared at the young alien. Ulu Ulix stared at his feet, abashed. “You put this entire mission in jeopardy!”

“I am sincerely sorry, Master,” Ulu said. “I am ashamed of my actions. But I only wanted to help.”

“Help?” Glynn-Beti scowled at him. Then she looked at Boba, still on his swoop. “This stranger is the one who helped!”

The Jedi bowed slightly. "I am in your debt, stranger. My profound thanks for saving the life of this most foolish of Padawans."

Boba nodded. "You're welcome." He was uncomfortably aware of Glynn-Beti's keen gaze boring into him. But an instant later her attention was elsewhere.

"Trooper!" she commanded. "You may all resume your watch! As for you—" She turned to Ulu Ulix. "You will remain by my side for the rest of this maneuver. Unless you prefer to wait on board the troopship?"

Ulu Ulix shook his head swiftly. "No, Master! I will obey this time."

"Good." Glynn-Beti began to walk away. But she had only taken a few steps when she stopped. She turned and stared at Boba.

*Uh-oh*, he thought.

"What is your place in this battle, stranger?" she asked. Her voice was calm, but there was a threat hidden in it. "You are not part of my battalion. And you are obviously not working for our enemy. You have not come from *there*—" She tilted her head at the citadel of Mazariyan. When she turned back to Boba her gaze was piercing. "We have sent some of our most valued soldiers inside—ARC troopers. They seldom fail us. Not one has returned from that place. Have you?"

Boba hesitated. The Jedi might be able to detect a lie. If she did, she could take him prisoner, whether or not he had saved her Padawan. At worst, he might languish in a Republic cell. At best, she could send him off-planet, back to Tatooine—where he would face the rage of Jabba the Hutt.

A prison cell might be preferable to that.

Boba stared back at Glynn-Beti. He was very glad she could not see his face behind his helmet.

"No. My sympathy lies with the Xamsters," he said.

The Jedi seemed to mull this over. Finally she nodded. "very well. I will not detain you. The natives of Xagobah are in dire

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need of whatever help they are given.” She beckoned Ulu Ulix to her side. “Come. We have much to do.”

“But Master—” Ulu stopped. He gazed up at a dark blur in the violet haze of Xagobah’s atmosphere. “What about the ramship?”

“We are well aware of the ramship, Ulu. Someone more experienced—and wiser—than you will deal with it.”

*Ouch!* thought Boba. *Wonder who that might be?*

He watched as the Jedi and her Padawan headed back toward the AT-TE.

Just before they boarded the AT-TE, Glynn-Beti turned and shouted back to Boba, “Yes. Someone else will take care of the ramship. You, stranger, might want to launch your solitary attack at that moment. Mind my words!” The Jedi Master then disappeared from view.

Boba quickly powered up his borrowed swoop. It gave a hoarse cough and sputtered into the air.

Boba circled back to where the siege was in full swing. The air blazed blue and black and silver with laser fire. Everywhere around the fortress, clone troopers were attacking Wat Tambor’s droid forces. *What did the Jedi mean?* he wondered.

It looked like the Republic was in trouble.

The Separatists had launched a counterattack! “This isn’t good,” Boba muttered. “Not for me, at least!”

Boba had thought that Wat Tambor’s citadel was well-guarded before. Now he realized the canny Separatist had deliberately hidden the full power of his forces. Because suddenly the gaping maw of Mazariyan yawned open. There was a horrible, thunderous clattering sound, and hundreds—maybe thousands—of droids came streaming from the fortress. Spider droids, super battle droids, even dreaded and lethal droidekas, like gigantic insects rolling out of a rotten stump.

Boba gaze down at them, transfixed. “How am I going to get through that and into the fortress? There’s no way I can land without being seen and pulverized!”

## STAR WARS: A New Threat

He steered the swoop down for a closer look.

Too close.

With a grinding noise, one of the droideikas came to an abrupt halt. It swiveled and uncurled into firing position, its black, eyeless head pointed straight up—directly at Boba.

It fired.

“Aghhh!”

Too late, Boba yanked at the swoop’s controls. A blast of heat struck the swoop. At the same instant, Boba dove from it. He could feel the surge of fire through his protective boots. He could hear the concussive blast roaring through the air like a seismic charge.

But all he could see was the explosion of laser fire all around him as he plummeted helplessly—right into the battle.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Ummmpph!” With a grunt Boba smashed onto the ground. His body armor absorbed the blow, but it took him a moment to catch his breath. There was such a thick haze of smoke and spores he could barely see. He blinked, trying to clear his vision.

What he was able to make out was not good: a clone trooper, just millimeters from his face!

“No way!” yelled Boba. He rolled onto his back and kicked out, just as the clone took aim. Boba’s feet connected with the clone’s knees. He wasn’t strong enough to knock down the trooper. But Boba did throw him off balance.

And that was all it took. Boba was on his feet again, blaster raised. The clone towered above him, its face invisible behind its helmet. But something in the way it stood, something in the way it held its blaster, made Boba hesitate.

Because, just for a flickering moment, it wasn’t a clone trooper there.

It was Jango Fett—Boba’s father.

Boba recognized Jango’s stance. He recognized Jango’s strength. He even recognized the way Jango’s head drew back slightly as he aimed his weapon. Only this wasn’t Jango Fett. This was a clone trooper who had decided that Boba was an enemy.



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“You’re not my father!” Boba’s voice was drowned in the blast from his Westar. “You’re a clone!”

The trooper’s aim was excellent—but Boba’s was better. In a blaze of flame and vapor, the clone trooper fell.

*One down!* thought Boba. *Only a couple thousand to go.*

He whirled, and found himself smack in the middle of the battle about 200 meters from the citadel walls. Above him, droid fighters shot from the citadel’s peak. Battle droids swarmed around its base, blasting away. Clone troopers ran in formation. As they neared the fortress, the formation broke up. Individual troopers raced toward the battle droids. One clone got caught by a hailfire missile and vanished into a thousand pieces.

*Yuck!* thought Boba. He looked away quickly.

*BARRAAMMM!*

Brilliant multicolored pulses of laser fire erupted from the clones’ blaster rifles. All were now aimed at the rolling, firing hailfire.

*KRRRAARRROW!*

A direct hit! One of the hailfire’s wheels disengaged and the clone’s body was dragged into the ground by the still churning second wheel. A few moments later it exploded in a fiery blast.

But the Republic’s troops were still in danger. They were vastly outnumbered, for starters. And somewhere above them, the ramship was headed for their assault ship.

That was bad enough. But what was worse—the droidekas were laying waste to the clones. They rolled across the battlefield, safe within their shimmering forcefields. Laser fire bounced from them harmlessly. Harmless for the droidekas, anyway. Some of the pulses ricocheted back and mowed down the very troopers who had fired them.

With a cry Boba dodged a sudden flare of blue. A super battle droid stalked toward him, took aim and—

*BLAAM!*

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Boba fired. The upper half of the droid disintegrated into shards of flaming plasteel. Boba whirled and blasted another droid. It fell. Boba staggered backward, struggling for breath.

*I can't keep up with them, he thought desperately. There's too many! The droids are fighting the clone troopers. The troopers are fighting the droids—*

*And they're all firing at me!*

Around him was chaos. Black smoke mingled with clouds of purple spores from malvil-trees and giant mushrooms caught in the crossfire. Boba adjusted his helmet, striving to see through the haze. Xeran's powder is wearing off, he thought with dismay. *The Republic's getting wasted.* Not that he cared about the Republic. But if Wat Tambor was powerful enough to destroy them, what chance did Boba have?

*Plenty, Boba thought grimly. I'm not giving up.*

A sudden roar made him look up. For a split second, every battle droid paused. As though they shared one mind, they all looked up, too.

"Starfighters!" cried Boba.

A phalanx of starfighters arrowed through the haze. Wat Tambor's air defenses fired at them in a blaze of blinding energy. The starfighters' leader banked sharply to the right. Boba stared up at it, admiringly.

"He sure knows what he's doing." He thought of Ulu Ulix, and smiled. Then he adjusted his helmet's focus as he took cover behind a wrecked vehicle. "Let's get a better look at this guy..."

But now the battle droids had also seen the fighter. A barrage of ground fire shot up toward it. The starfighter dove. Pulses exploded in the empty air as the ship raced downward through the flak generated by the citadel's air defenses. It made a lightning pass at the heads of the droids, decapitating dozens as it flew incredibly low. It was so close to the ground that Boba could see who was piloting it.

"Skywalker!" Boba felt a spike of excitement. He had seen Anakin Skywalker from a distance in the arena of Geonosis. The

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young Padawan was older now, but Boba recognized Anakin's defiant gaze—and his skill. "He can really fly that thing!"

Anakin's starfighter pulled up once more. A blaze of Separatist fire sparked around it. Then, without hesitating, the ship went into another dive. It came in low, pulling up at the last moment as it lobbed an energy charge at the citadel.

*KARRROOOM!*

The charge exploded. Flaming spikes of durasteel flew everywhere. A raw smoldering hole appeared in the citadel's side.

"Yes!" said Boba.

*Wish I could do that!* Boba thought as another spasm of flame arced by him. Boba jumped, then ran through a throng of clones. He was now using all the skills he'd acquired as a bounty hunter. His blaster fired without pause. Droids exploded in orange sparks—and clones fell left and right, as he fought his way toward the fortress.

This time, Boba didn't feel bad at all.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Near the foot of Wat Tambor's citadel, a homing spider droid had fallen. Its large form slumped over on two of its legs, forming a small, protected area.

Boba headed for this makeshift refuge. He had to leap over several dead clones, and the smoking wreckage of a swoop. But once in the shadow of the droid he was safe. For a few moments, anyway.

Now what?

Boba crouched, panting, and stared out at the battlefield. The clone trooper reinforcements were holding their own against the Separatists, but were unable to advance. Boba doubted they'd be able to defeat Wat Tambor's forces. The clones were organic and could be killed. And they *were* being killed in great numbers. The droids couldn't regenerate, but there seemed to be an endless supply of them streaming from the citadel's mouth.

But could it really be endless? Surely even Wat Tambor's army had a limit?

Boba peered out from the crook of the fallen droid's elbow. Far above him, Anakin Skywalker's starfighter led the Jedi forces in the air attack. They were targeting the spider droids.

As Boba watched, he saw another hailfire come spinning out of the shadows of the malvil-trees. It rolled toward the center of

the battlefield, scattering clones like leaves. It stopped. It raised its missile launcher, taking aim at one of the starfighters. With a deafening burst of energy, a barrage of plasma pulses went soaring upward—directly toward Anakin Skywalker’s yellow starfighter.

*He’s doomed!* thought Boba.

But the Padawan had other plans. Just as the plasma bursts approached it, he arrowed his starfighter to one side. The energy bolts continued onward, up, up, up through Xagobah’s violet sky—

And found another target—the ramship!

“Whoa!” Boba whooped.

An immense starburst of pure energy like a thunderbolt surged out from where the ramship had been. Boba tensed, waiting for fallout; but none came. The energy stored in the ramship was so dense and powerful that the explosion caused it to self-implode.

Score one for the Republic!

Quickly, Boba scrambled between the fallen spider droid’s legs. He stared out at the battlefield. For a moment, everything had come to a standstill. Battle droids and clones alike gazed up at the waves of energy rippling through Xagobah’s atmosphere—violet, scarlet, gold.

“Very pretty,” muttered Boba. He glanced at the entrance to Mazariyan. He couldn’t believe it.

No droids were there!

Boba looked around again. And yes, battle droids and sentry droids alike all seemed distracted. This was the moment Glynn-Beti had foretold!

*It’s the energy surge!* Boba realized. *It’s momentarily scrambled their command centers.*

This was his chance!

Staying as low as he could, Boba darted from the shelter of the spider droid. He raced toward the fortress, breathing hard. The entry to Mazariyan gaped, faintly gleaming. Just a few more

## Elizabeth Hand

meters and he was there. None of the clone troopers would make it in time; they were still too far off.

Boba paused, hand on his blaster. Behind him, the sounds of battle began once more. In front of him was a problem: The maw of Wat Tambor's citadel opened onto the Separatist's stronghold—and blades of purple fungus ringed the entrance like razor teeth. Rows of spines stuck out threateningly, ready to pierce any intruder. He recalled what Xeran had told him and suddenly Boba understood.

Wat Tambor had perverted Xagobah's fungus to his own ends—inside his citadel.

*I have to get in there, Boba thought desperately. But how?*

Boba shoved his blaster into his belt. He drew his vibroshiv.

*No, he thought, and reluctantly replaced it. That will just make it worse.*

Boba's hand moved from his belt. That was when he felt something in his pocket. Something round.

And suddenly Boba remembered.

Xeran's spore-globe.

What was it Xeran had said?

*"If you have need of camouflage, crush this."*

Boba pulled the globe from his pocket. He stared at the purple sphere in the palm of his hand.

It looked harmless. And Xeran had said it was harmless—to Boba. But he had also said the spores acted as chemical messengers. Could they somehow damage the citadel?

*Well, here goes nothing!*

Boba glared up at the massive structure. Then he raised his hand, and, hoping this wasn't a mistake, he crushed the globe.

It was like the energy surge that had destroyed the ramship. Only this surge was darkest purple and smelled faintly of spices.

And it was, somehow, sentient. Boba watched in awe as a vast spore-cloud enveloped the base of the fortress. The cloud moved like a gigantic paramecium. And as it did, the spines nearest to

Boba drooped. As Boba stared, fascinated, he saw more metallic spines struggling to emerge.

But for the moment the spore-cloud was stronger. The spines withered. New ones wriggled helplessly, then seemed to melt away. But more kept coming, needle-sharp, and Boba quickly realized that the spores were just a temporary solution. And whatever camouflage they offered would be temporary, too.

*Now!* he thought, and turned back to the entrance. Sure enough, the rows of spines had withered. They hung in limp black ribbons around the opening. Boba lunged forward, head down. Around him the spore-cloud was already starting to disperse.

*If I can just get inside...*

Tiny spines began to poke through the entryway. Tiny razor-sharp petals thrust from the edges of the opening. Boba grabbed his vibroshiv and slashed at them. Then, with one last desperate lunge, he leaped forward. Metallic strands of fungus slashed at his helmet. Writhing silvery vines slithered from the entryway—

Too late!

With a gasp, Boba's feet connected with the ground. He staggered forward into a murky purplish tunnel, heedless of the spikes behind him. Beneath his boots the floor trembled like kallil-virus jelly. From the curved durasteel walls, pale silvery fronds and stems waved like dead fingers. There was a smell of scorched metal—and a faint, ceaseless *thrum* as if some unimaginably vast machine heart was beating somewhere out of sight.

Boba took a deep breath. Then, with every bit of courage he could command, he stepped forward—

Into the citadel of Wat Tambor.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

It took several minutes for Boba's eyes to adjust to the dimness.

Yet it was not completely dark. An eerie greenish haze hung over everything. Glowing orbs appeared to be set into the fortress's curved, metallic walls. When Boba drew close to one, he saw that it was not an orb, but a mushroom—a luminous mushroom. Wat Tambor had bioengineered the fungus to merge with metal and plasteel circuitry. Phosphorescent bacteria made it gleam. When Boba touched it, glowing pale green slime stuck to his glove.

“Ugh.” Hastily Boba wiped it off. He didn't want to be any more noticeable than he already was!

He began walking down the hallway. The walls were smooth and metallic and curved, as was the ceiling. They were covered by a film of squishy, violet fungus that squelched beneath his feet. But there were other things in the walls, too. Blinking chips and miniature monitors, shining crimson threads of circuitry like blood vessels.

Wat Tambor's genius had not been content with changing the malvil-trees' genetic code. He had developed all kinds of nanotechnology. This had enabled him to fuse computer intelligence into the fungus citadel as well.



Yet the monitors did not seem to be alert to Boba's presence. He stopped in front of one, holding his breath: nothing.

*The power surge from the ramship blast must have scrambled their circuits, he thought. But that won't last long...better hurry!*

Boba moved as quickly and stealthily as he could. He watched for droids but saw none. Now and then another curving passage would join the central tunnel. Boba peered down these.

What he saw made him content to stay in the main passage. The walls in those tunnels had strange, lumpy shapes in them. Shapes that sometimes moved or kicked or flailed. Boba wasn't certain what they were.

But he had a pretty good idea—he remembered the last ARC troopers Glynn-Beti had spoken of.

And Xeran's people—the Xamsters who had struggled against the evil Separatist. Boba gritted his teeth. He thought of the gentle malvil-trees. He thought of the gentle Xeran, forced to take up arms against Wat Tambor. Boba's hatred of Wat Tambor grew. *I will show no mercy, he thought fiercely. Xeran's people can no longer avenge themselves. I will take vengeance for them!*

*And, of course, I'll get Jabba's bounty, too.*

The passage began to climb slowly upward. As it did, it curved, as though Boba were climbing some gigantic spiral staircase. He passed shimmering walls where monitors flickered yellow and green and red. He passed a room like the hollow chamber of a human heart, pulsing slowly in and out. He passed tube-shaped openings that gave him a fragmented view of the battle below.

But he passed no droids. He passed no clones. As far as Boba could tell, he was the only thing that walked inside of Mazariyan.

And that made him nervous.

Could Wat Tambor have left? Could he have somehow escaped before Boba arrived here to capture him?

Boba frowned. *I sure hope not.*

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Things had been bad enough outside, with the citadel under siege. He suspected they could get much worse if he was found inside by Wat Tambor's troops—or the Republic's.

He continued his journey, in and up. The air grew thick and heavy. Boba made sure his helmet's intake filter was working. He thought of the violet haze of spores that surrounded this planet. He could only imagine what kind of disgusting, protective spores were produced inside Mazariyan.

Sometimes an unpleasant thought would work its way through Boba like a splinter.

*What if I never find him? What if I can't find my way out?*

He was working on pure intuition now. The curved passage seemed to spiral endlessly up into the fortress. Sometimes it would branch. When that happened, Boba would choose one way or another, on instinct.

He came to another place where the tunnel divided. To his left, it curved upward, its smooth walls gleaming purple. To Boba's right, the passage curved slightly downward. Here the tunnel had a deeper glow, almost indigo.

*Wonder what that means?* thought Boba.

For a moment he paused, thinking. Then he placed his hand on his blaster, and walked boldly into the right-hand passage.

He hoped he'd made the right choice.

Up until now he had—but not anymore.

Boba didn't know it yet. But his good fortune was about to dissipate like the malvil's spores.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

The air here was warmer; so deep and dark a blue it was almost black. Boba didn't want to risk shining a light in the tunnel. He adjusted the infrared on his helmet, but that seemed to make it worse. So he moved very slowly, feeling his way. His gloved hands stuck to the slick walls. The soft, dank floor sucked at his boots. Worse, the faint thrumming sound was louder here. He could feel the floor vibrating under his feet. Ahead of him, the tunnel's walls grew uneven. As Boba drew closer, he quickly yanked his hand away.

Flabby, pale, fingerlike growths extended from the wall's surface. As Boba stared, they wriggled like the tendrils of a Bestine sea anemone. The tendrils were dark purple. Their tips were crimson.

"The Xabar fungus!" Boba exclaimed, recoiling. He remembered Xeran's warning: The tentacles released a paralyzing toxin.

"Who goessss there?"

A hissing voice slashed through the air. Boba looked up sharply.

"Stranger—identify yourself!"

Boba felt his stomach clench—but not with fear. Anger had been building inside him ever since he entered the fortress.

## Elizabeth Hand

Now it boiled over.

A shadowy figure stood before him. Tall, with greenish skin, cold deep-set eyes, a lipless mouth. Even in the indigo darkness Boba recognized him.

The Clawdite, Nuri!

It had been two years since Boba had last seen him. That was on Aargau. The shapeshifter had been smaller then. So had Boba.

But Boba was definitely bigger now—bigger, and stronger, and heavily armed. And this Clawdite had betrayed Boba. Boba had trusted him. In return, the shapeshifter had stolen what remained of his father's fortune.

"Nuri," Boba said in a low, controlled voice. He saw the Clawdite's eyes narrow. "You owe me."

"Owe you?" The Clawdite did not recognize him. His gaze shifted uncertainly from Boba to the passage behind him.

"That's right," said Boba. He drew his vibroshiv.

He lunged for the shapeshifter. As he did, Nuri's form seemed to melt. His neck grew longer and longer. His arms and legs shrank into nothingness. His head narrowed. Long, knife-sharp teeth filled his mouth. Feathered scales covered his body. Where the Clawdite had been, a huge arrak snake drew back to strike. Its glittering green eyes fixed on Boba. Then, hissing furiously, it wrapped its coils around him.

"Not so fast!" Boba yelled. He struggled against the thick, powerful serpentine shape. The arrak snake's coils began to tighten. Boba fought for breath. His vibroshiv fought to discover some weak spot in the snake's scaly armor—

And found it! Just beneath the snake's fanged jaw there was a patch of flesh unprotected by scales. Boba plunged the vibroshiv there—when once again the shapeshifter's form changed!

In place of the arrak snake was a copper-colored dinko. It had crushing jaws, and pointed talons the length of Boba's arm. Its jaws snapped at Boba. When he kicked back at it, a foul-smelling spray squirted from the dinko.

“Ugh!” Boba staggered backward. For a moment even his Mandalorian helmet was no help—the fumes choked him. Then his secondary filters kicked in. Coughing and shaking, Boba struck back. The dinko snarled, lashing at him with one long, pointed talon. Boba’s hand fumbled for his blaster. He grabbed the weapon and was just raising it to fire, when the dinko abruptly faded.

Going, going...gone.

“Hey—!”

Boba blinked, trying to find whatever the shapeshifter had become. And saw a giant fefze beetle, the same color as the walls. It crawled through the toxic Xabar fungus. Then it scuttled into the shadows.

“No!” Boba shouted and lunged after the escaping insect. But he could barely see it in the darkness. Desperately he took aim with his blaster.

*No, wait—*Boba shook his head. *That’s what he wants! If I fire, I’ll alert everyone in the fortress—assuming there’s someone here!*

He shoved his weapon back onto his belt. He could just make out the beetle skittering down the tunnel. Boba took a step back, then took a running leap. As he flew through the air he leaned forward, keeping the black shape in sight.

*Uummb!*

With a grunt Boba fell. The slimy floor beneath him shuddered. His hand grasped at darkness for the beetle—

And got it!

“You’re not going anywhere!”

This time Boba kept a firm hold on the slick scales. Moments later he was grappling with the full-grown Clawdite.

“Don’t forget, I have this,” Boba hissed. His vibroshiv suddenly hovered inches above Nuri’s neck. He felt the shapeshifter slump in defeat.

“That’s better.” Boba stared coldly at Nuri. The Clawdite glared back at him. “Now—I need an answer. Fast. Where is Wat Tambor?”

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Nuri bared his teeth. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Boba drew the vibroshiv to within a hairbreadth of Nuri’s flesh. “Do you want to feel how much closer this can get?” he whispered menacingly. “I know who you are, Nuri. I know you helped the Techno Union spring Wat Tambor from prison. Now I want to know—where is he?”

The Clawdite hissed. Its evil eyes glittered. It stared at Boba’s vibroshiv. Then it drew a long shuddering breath.

“That way—” Nuri’s head twitched, indicating the passage leading down. “The central chamber. He’s there.”

“Is he well-guarded?”

Nuri’s eyes fixed on Boba. The vibroshiv hummed above the Clawdite’s neck.

“No,” said the shapeshifter reluctantly. “He sent the last of his droid forces to join battle with the Republic. But Grievous is coming—and he will bring reinforcements.”

“Grievous?” Boba frowned. “Who’s that?”

“The General.” The Clawdite stared at him with hatred. A slow, nasty smile spread across his face. “Whoever you are, I can see that you are working alone. The Republic will not come to your aid. You will meet General Grievous soon enough, stranger—and when you do, he will destroy you!”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Boba snarled in rage. “Those were your last words, Clawdite!”

He began to press the vibroshiv against the shapeshifter’s jugular vein. Then he stopped.

*If Nuri’s body is found, Wat Tambor will know there’s an intruder inside his fortress. But if I let him go, he’ll sound the alert....*

Boba looked around the dim tunnel. His gaze lit on a clump of the paralyzing Xabar fungus.

*That’s it!*

He began to drag the Clawdite toward the fungus. Nuri fought furiously. But Boba was stronger.

“I’ve been really curious about how this stuff works,” he said. He pinned the Clawdite to the ground, then grabbed the shapeshifter’s arm. “Now I can find out.”

Nuri struggled as Boba pushed his arm down. Sensing prey, the Xabar’s tentacles reached upward, wriggling in anticipation.

Closer...closer...

The Clawdite’s hand hung above fungus. Then, like pale, grasping fingers, the tentacles grabbed him.

“Unnnhhh...!”

Abruptly the Clawdite went slack. He hung, dead weight, from Boba’s hands. Boba recoiled, worried that the toxin might somehow reach him.

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“Nuri?” he said in a low voice. “Nuri?”

The Clawdite sprawled before him. He looked dead. He had no pulse. He was not breathing. His eyes stared upward, blank and cold as stone. When Boba gingerly touched his arm, it felt stiff.

“Well,” Boba said, scrambling back to his feet. He gazed at the fallen Clawdite lying beside the Xabar fungus. If anyone found him, they would assume he had accidentally stumbled upon the paralyzing mushroom. “I hope that stuff works for a good long time. Long enough to get me to Wat Tambor, at least.”

He began to run down the passage. It was noticeably warmer here. And there were more signs of Wat Tambor’s technological genius.

Ribbons of circuitry gleamed along the tunnel’s soft, slimy walls. Phosphorescent globes hung alongside shining plasteel tubes that crackled with electricity. Computer monitors the size of Boba’s thumb blinked like crimson eyes. Xabar fungus sprouted from discarded bits of droids like hair.

And always there was that steady, powerful thrumming, like the beating of a massive heart.

Boba tried not to think about that too much. He didn’t like to imagine what kind of creature would have a heart that size.

Ahead of him the deep-blue glow of the tunnel began to brighten. Now it was hard to see the walls of the passage behind all the layers of metal and computer circuitry. The tunnel turned, and turned again. Boba’s steps slowed. He crept alongside the wall, eyes fixed on what was before him.

Just a few meters away, the tunnel ended. A high, smooth archway opened into a single large chamber. Silvery violet light spilled from it, threaded with deep purple and blood red.

The light was so intense it hurt Boba’s eyes. He paused and adjusted his optical sensors. Then he checked his weapons. His blasters, his vibroshiv, Ygabba’s holoshroud, ion stunner, dart shooter...



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Which would help him capture Wat Tambor? All of them—or none?

Boba's stomach clenched. For the first time a shiver of apprehension went through him.

*Fear is energy*, he told himself. *Use it.*

He took a deep breath. Then, keeping as low as he could, he ran the last few meters from the tunnel through the archway.

And found himself face-to-face with Wat Tambor.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Boba sucked in his breath sharply.

He was in a large chamber, more like a cavern than a room. Blinking and shimmering circuits covered the slivery walls. Banks of monitors stretched everywhere. There were heaps of parts belonging to droids—arms, legs, blasters, power cells. Clumps of Xabar fungus sprang up between them, and other mushrooms as well.

None of this surprised Boba.

But what was in the center of the chamber did.

Thrusting up from the floor was a huge, shapeless, purple mass. It pulsed and shuddered like a massive slime mold. Flickers of crimson flame raced inside it. From it protruded dozens of tentacle-like tubes. Each time it pulsed, Boba could see darkly glowing violet liquid stream through the tubes, feeding outward into the walls.

There were other veins as well. These rippled from the walls and into the bioengineered nerve center, feeding it. The liquid that surged through them was deep red.

Boba stared at it, revolted. This was why none of Glynn-Beti's ARC troopers returned. He was gazing at Mazariyan's heart! That was how the *enormous* fungus received its power—by feeding on what it found *inside*!

A deep voice shattered Boba's thoughts.

"You are not who I was expecting."

Boba looked up. In the center of the room towered the Separatist. His own expression was momentarily as surprised as Boba's.

Wat Tambor was tall and powerfully built. His body was encased in combat armor that he had designed himself. Only the top of his ridged skull was visible above it. His eyes were hidden behind round optic sensors. A heavy metal cowl covered his mouth and the lower part of his face.

When Wat Tambor spoke, his inhuman voice was calm. "So. An intruder. That is no matter. I will make use of you—one way or another!"

He raised his hand. A ray of scarlet light surged from it. With a cry Boba dove to one side. The ray struck the floor, pulverizing plasteel into smoking goo.

Wat Tambor cursed. Boba rolled, drawing his blaster. He fired.

*BLAM!*

The blast from his weapon arced straight toward Wat Tambor!

Boba's joy abruptly died. Tambor was quicker than he looked, and dodged the blast, which was then seemingly absorbed by the chamber wall.

Boba felt the entire room around him shudder. The huge nerve center gave a powerful surge. The shimmering circuits glowed even brighter.

"Your weapons only serve to feed it," announced Wat Tambor in that calm, mechanical voice. "As you will yourself!"

Boba staggered to his feet again. "No!" he shouted.

Mazariyan's tentacles were everywhere. Writhing, wriggling, crawling along the floor—dozens of them, with a single target.

Boba Fett!

With a cry Boba drew his vibroshiv. He slashed at a huge vein and felt his blade cut into it with a satisfying slurp. Shimmering

## Elizabeth Hand

liquid splattered out. He ducked to one side, nearly falling on the slick floor.

But the chamber floor was already at work, sucking up the liquid greedily.

“Take that!” cried Boba. A cobralike tentacle swooped toward him and he grabbed it. It lashed up, scraping the ceiling. Boba hung on with all his strength. He waited until he was just above where Wat Tambor stood beside Mazariyan’s beating nerve center. Then he let go.

“Yaaah!” he shouted.

He lunged for the Techno Union Foreman, blaster firing.

Too late. Wat Tambor moved too quickly.

The Separatist whirled, sending another bolt of energy flying from his hand. Boba lunged for the floor. If he could just reach that pile of broken metal...

“Agh!”

A blazing burst of pain struck his leg, so powerful it overwhelmed his body armor, which now cracked and smoked. Boba crashed against the ground. He had a glimpse of Wat Tambor’s figure searching for him. Then the Separatist suddenly looked away, toward the chamber’s entrance.

*I’ve got to hide*, thought Boba in desperation, *before he sees I’m down....*

He rolled and began to drag himself to the heap of droid parts. It was darker there. He might be able to gain a minute, enough time to get Wat Tambor in his sights once more.

Boba drew himself up by the wall. The shattered droids gave him enough shadow to hide, for a moment. In the middle of the room the tentacles were still gulping eagerly at the fluid leaking from the severed vein.

“Where is he?” Boba murmured. He rubbed his leg. The pain was subsiding—it had only been a glancing blow. “Gotta find him—”

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Boba strained to see Wat Tambor. But the Techno Union Foreman was out of sight, hidden by the bulk of the nerve center.

Boba could hear him, though. He was talking to someone—but who? Nuri?

*I should have killed the Clawdite!* Boba thought angrily. *Now he's betrayed me again!* He began to ease himself from the shadows. One hand remained firmly on his blaster. The other was on his belt, ready to draw whatever weapon he might need.

But as Boba looked up, he realized he'd be needing all of them. Because into the room strode the most terrible, vicious figure he had ever witnessed.

Its head nearly touched the ceiling—a head composed of interlocking bands of an alloy he'd never seen before. A pale, cowed robe cloaked its body. Through its folds Boba glimpsed its true form: gleaming metallic limbs, six-fingered hands like robotic claws. When it turned its head, searching, Boba saw its eyes. Golden reptilian eyes, the pupil a black slash set within blood-colored sockets. Even Mazariyan's tentacles seemed to sense his awful threat. They retracted into the heart, like a carnivorous snail into its shell, waiting.

Boba's blood froze. Suddenly, and with horrible certainty, he knew he was looking upon the most powerful, most lethal threat he had ever faced.

The terrifying general of the droid army—  
Grievous!

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Boba's mouth went dry. Grievous was flanked by two droid bodyguards, nearly as tall as he was. Their eyes were huge and round and crimson. They scanned the room methodically, heads sweeping back and forth.

Any moment they would find Boba!

*Now what?* he thought. His hands moved quickly over his weapons belt. The blasters' energy would just feed Mazariyan. And his vibroshiv would be useless against a droid.

Suddenly his hand felt something else. A small compact object, fitted neatly on his belt.

Ygabba's holoshroud.

*Yes!* Boba moved so that he was sitting upright. He peered out.

Grievous's bodyguards had started circling the room, scanning for the intruder. Grievous stood ominously in the center of the chamber by the heart, waiting. Wat Tambor was near a monitor, busily inputting information.

*Grievous hasn't seen me yet,* Boba thought. *He doesn't know exactly what I look like, or who I am.*

Boba had no idea what image Ygabba had scanned into the holoshroud. But it was this or nothing.

## STAR WARS: A New Threat

*This is my best chance for living long enough to thank you, Ygabba,* thought Boba. *It better be good!*

His finger hovered above the holoshroud's button. He took a deep breath. Then he pressed it, and stood.

There was a hum from where the cell hung at Boba's waist. Then he was surrounded by a glowing halo. It extended high above his head. When he moved his arm, the halo moved. When he stepped forward, it moved too.

From inside the holoshroud, Boba could see only this shimmering cloud. But others, he knew, saw something completely different. They saw whatever image Ygabba had scanned into the cell.

But what image was that?

As Boba stepped forward, the droid bodyguards snapped upright. Their empty, glowing eyes burned even brighter. Boba moved to one side, heading for the arch that led out. As he did, he caught a glimpse of his reflection in a monitor screen. At the same time, the bodyguards spoke.

"Durge!"

Boba almost yelped with joy.

His friend had scanned Durge's image into the holoshroud!

And that was what the droids saw: not Boba Fett, but the hulking figure of one of the galaxy's most feared bounty hunters!

"Destroy him!"

An icy commanding voice thundered through the chamber. Grievous pointed at his bodyguards. As one, they lunged forward, firing. Boba leaped aside, and the blasts struck the wall behind him. It exploded in shards of plasteel and oozing fungus. One of Mazariyan's tentacles poked out from the pulsing heart of the citadel. Grievous turned and raised a hand threateningly. The tentacle shrank back.

"I said, destroy him!"

The droids stalked across the room. Boba fired back at them. His blasts bounced off their armored forms. He yanked out his

## Elizabeth Hand

ion stunner and fired. A surge of ionic plasma flared from it. One of the droids fell back, momentarily stunned.

“Yes!” crowed Boba.

He could see his own reflection mirrored in viewscreens across the chamber, tall and powerful. For an instant it seemed that the bodyguards might be taken aback as well.

“It is indeed Durge,” one said in its cold robotic voice.

Grievous turned his horrible eyes upon Wat Tambor. “You said it was a Mandalorian warrior,” he said.

Wat Tambor looked at him. "He must have brought reinforcements," he replied.

"It is no matter," said Grievous.

Boba sent another bolt flying from the ion stunner at the bodyguards. Then he turned and started racing for the door.

The holoshroud's illusion would last for only two minutes. How much time was left? Enough to make the bodyguards hesitate before attacking him again?

Everything around him was a glowing blur as he ran for the arch. If he could only escape from this chamber, he could hide within the citadel. He already had a plan for utilizing those tentacles to capture Wat Tambor. If only he could—

Vvvvvmmmmmm...

The hum from the holoshroud's power cell suddenly grew silent. Around Boba, the veil of Durge's image flickered into pixels of color. For a second he could see himself clearly, as the others had seen him: not Boba but Durge, his mighty arm raised to fire, Boba's weapon shrouded in the image of Durge's own blaster.

Then the holoshroud's illusion was gone. The power cell had run out.

And so had Boba's luck.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“That is him! The intruder!”

Wat Tambor’s voice rang out like a clear bell. Boba watched as Grievous and his two bodyguards turned to stare at him.

“You are not Durge, as I suspected.” Grievous’s voice was cold, with no trace of human emotion. “But you will die all the same!”

He lifted his arm. Before Boba could move, Grievous gave a command. A blinding flash of energy leaped from an unseen weapon held by one of his bodyguards. It struck Boba in the chest and he fell, another piece of his father’s armor smoking and cracked.

“Get him,” commanded Grievous.

The droid bodyguards sprang forward. But Boba’s body armor had absorbed the blow’s impact. He rolled to one side, struggling to his feet and backing against the wall.

“You won’t take me!” he yelled.

“Maybe not alive,” said Wat Tambor calmly. “But dead will suit us just as well.”

The droids stalked toward Boba. He grasped a blaster in each of his hands and raised them. He waited until the droids were just meters from him. Then, ducking, he fired and darted to one side.

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*KABLOWWW!*

The blasts bounced harmlessly from the droids. They swiveled, firing in staccato bursts. Boba fired back.

*KABLAAM!*

He inched along the wall, blasters flaming. *If I can just reach the door*, he thought desperately.

There was another blast of power from the droids. Right above Boba's head the wall fragmented. He took advantage of the cloud of splintered metal and mushroom ooze, and ran.

Beside him fresher, cooler air streamed from the dimness—the tunnel. Boba made for it, his breath coming in short, deep bursts as he ran. He could hear the clack of the droids' measured footsteps behind him. He could imagine their arms raised, and that terrible, cloaked figure watching—

*Don't think! Move!*

He dove for the entrance. Cool air embraced him, and blessed darkness. His feet touched the now-familiar, slimy surface. Before him stretched the passage. Just up ahead it divided.

*If I can make that fork, I can lose them*, Boba thought. His heart strained as he raced toward it. *If I can just—*

Searing pain tore through him.

Boba cried out in agony.

He struggled a few steps more.

Another torturous stab penetrated his armor from behind.

He fell.

"So," an icy voice echoed through the tunnel "Now I see you as you truly are."

On the ground, Boba writhed, trying to reach his blaster and turning to look behind him. Above him the cloaked figure of General Grievous loomed into view—and in one hand it now gripped a lightsaber glowing in the haze.

How could this be? Was the general a Jedi?!

Grievous's eyes were yellow orbs within a skeletal, silvery mask. Behind him stood Wat Tambor, flanked by the droid bodyguards.

“Not that it matters,” the icy voice continued. Grievous’s other hand slid from the folds of his cape and then emerged with a second lightsaber ignited. “Because you are going to die now.”

Boba struggled vainly to reach his weapons belt. Pain lanced through him, as though flames ran through his veins. He fell back.

“It looks as though he is in death convulsions already,” said Wat Tambor.

And suddenly Boba had an idea. Without turning his head, he let his gaze flicker across the floor of the tunnel. There, not a millimeter away, a pale clump of the paralyzing Xabar fungus sprouted.

*Can’t—be—seen—moving!* Boba thought. His hand crept toward the fungus. *Must—reach it!*

Grievous drew back both lightsabers to strike. Boba tensed. He let his hand rest upon the ground. He moved his wrist, fractionally, so that his glove slipped upward.

A tiny patch of his skin was now exposed.

“He’s dead,” Wat Tambor repeated. “Our troops await us outside, General.”

The young bounty hunter held his breath. From the corner of his eye, he could see fingers of faintly glowing fungus. They were so close that he could almost feel them—almost touch them—

*Now!*

Something cool and damp licked the patch of exposed skin upon his wrist. His hand, and then his wrist, grew numb. A freezing breath seemed to exhale into his lungs.

“General,” urged Wat Tambor.

The icy numbness spread through Boba’s body. He tried to breathe but could not. He felt his heart pump feebly. His vision began to dim. His mission to capture Wat Tambor had failed.

What would his father have thought?

*Xeran said the paralysis was only temporary,* Boba recalled as he drifted off. *He better be right....*

## Elizabeth Hand

Around him the chamber began to grow even more dim. A flicker of consciousness raced through Boba's brain. He recalled how Jabba would sometimes have his prisoners brought to him, frozen in carbonite.

*Wonder if it feels like this...*

It was the last thing Boba thought.

"General, please!" said Wat Tambor. "Look at him—he's dead. No one could have survived those blows!"

Wat Tambor came up to him and nudged at Boba's senseless form. The bounty hunter's body moved, but did not respond. Grievous swept past the Techno Union Foreman, in turn. Disengaging the lightsabers, he kicked Boba.

"Dead," echoed one of the droid bodyguards.

"Dead," the other repeated.

"Leave him," said Wat Tambor. "There will be plenty of time to dispose of the body when we return. And plenty of others to join him, too," he added with a malicious mechanical laugh.

"Come!" commanded Grievous. "He is no Jedi. I will not waste my skill any longer on such a lackey." He turned, then stalked down the passage, Wat Tambor at his heels. The bodyguards followed, the citadel echoing as they passed. In the tunnel, a dark form remained, motionless, senseless, upon the ground.

Outside, the siege of Mazariyan raged on.

Inside, Boba Fett's battle for life was just beginning.





# STAR WARS®

## *BOBA FETT*™

PURSUIT

ELIZABETH HAND







# CHAPTER ONE

Death is silence: eternal, dark, colorless, without form or meaning.

Boba Fett had watched his father, Jango Fett, die, murdered by the hated Jedi Mace Windu. At the time Boba had felt only grief and rage. In the years that followed, he felt sorrow, the dull constant ache of missing his father. It was an ache that had receded somewhat over the last few years. But it had never disappeared.

The one thing Boba had never felt—had never even allowed himself to imagine—was what it would feel like to actually die. He had never believed he would experience death firsthand—

But now Boba Fett was dead.

His motionless form lay in a dark, twisting tunnel inside Mazariyan, the immense, mazelike fortress of the Separatist Tech genius Wat Tambor. Outside the citadel's walls, a fierce battle raged. The might of Wat Tambor's robotic troops was massed against the dwindling resources of the Republic, led by the Jedi General Glynn-Beti. The walls of Mazariyan shuddered beneath repeated bombardments by the Republic troops. Fissures appeared in the floor, only to be immediately repaired by microscopic nanotechs. A crack ran across the ceiling above Boba's lifeless body. A thick, mucuslike substance began to drip

## **Elizabeth Hand**

down—the organically derived fluid used to power Wat Tambor’s massive array of machines.

Had Boba been alive, he would have known this was a bad sign. The Republic had breached the outermost of Mazariyan’s defenses. The living fortress had been so badly damaged that it was losing the ability to repair itself quickly enough to survive the Republic’s assault.

But Boba knew nothing of this. Boba was dead—or so it seemed. Just millimeters from his cold hand lay a small clump of pale xabar fungus. The fungus produced a paralyzing toxin. The toxin’s effect was, fortunately, not permanent. To all appearances, someone under its influence appeared to be dead. Boba had grabbed the fungus in a last-ditch effort to save himself from a fatal encounter with the terrible Grievous, a partial droid general in the Separatist army.

But now it seemed that Boba’s desperate effort might have failed....

## CHAPTER TWO

“There it is.” A flat, affectless voice rang through the dark passage. “The infiltrator’s corpse.”

“Excellent.” A second voice echoed in the empty tunnel. “Human carrion. We shouldn’t waste our resources on it. It is of no use to us. We should leave it to rot.”

“That would be against orders. Wat Tambor said it is to be incinerated. There must be no evidence that it was ever here.”

Two spindly figures rounded the tunnel and began to approach Boba’s motionless body—a pair of PK-4 worker droids. These were not battle droids—Wat Tambor had commandeered all of those to defend Mazariyan. Only a skeletal force of worker and repair droids remained inside.

But even they would be leaving soon....

*KKKKAAARROOOOW!*

The worker droids paused as the entire fortress shook. The crack in the ceiling yawned wider. More of the thick, cold fluid oozed down onto Boba’s helmet. It seeped beneath the edge of the visor, dripping onto his skin. Its touch was cold, icy cold, spreading like frigid fingers across Boba’s cheek.

For the first time since he had been left for dead, Boba felt something.

*Father?*

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Deep within Boba's mind, a spark of consciousness flickered. He could neither move nor speak.

But he could feel. Sensation was slowly returning to his inert form. Another blast shook Wat Tambor's fortress. Protoplasmic gunk surged from where the ceiling had been blown apart. As the PK-4s stood, waiting for the blast to subside, more of the icy ooze dripped upon Boba's gloved hand. Some of it covered the bare patch of skin that he had deliberately exposed to the xabar fungus.

And now, that icy touch set off a chain reaction within Boba's brain.

Memory flared through him. He could not blink, or speak—but he could remember. The chill touch of organic ooze became the touch of Jango's hand upon his cheek. As though awakening from a dream, he remembered his father's face. Then the dream grew nightmarish as he remembered his father's death. He moaned.

Memory was returning to Boba Fett.

Memory, and consciousness—

And life!

*Mazariyan*, he thought groggily. *The battle...Grievous...Wat Tambor...*

"We must hurry." The droids stood above Boba's body. He quickly stifled his groan as one droid prodded him. Its insectile head swiveled to stare at the bounty hunter. "Wat Tambor wants no evidence that a spy gained entry."

The entire fortress shook once more.

"Another blast! No time to waste!" The second droid bent. Its servogrip hands slid roughly beneath Boba's arms.

*Agggghhhhhh!* Boba wanted to gasp with pain. As memory flooded him, so did further sensation—primarily pain. Grievous's last blow had penetrated Boba's body armor. He could feel where the armor had shattered upon impact, exposing his shoulder to the energy bolt.

The blow had not been fatal. But the pain was excruciating. Fortunately, he had not cried out. The droids still thought he was dead.

Far from it! Boba could feel his lungs expanding as he took in air. He could feel the droids' servogrips tightening around him. He was tall and muscular, and his body armor added to his bulk.

But the droids hoisted him up between them effortlessly, roughly—as though he was nothing but a sack of refuse. Or fuel for Wat Tambor's furnace...

Which, to them, he was.

*Agh*, he thought, gritting his teeth. He could *definitely* feel pain. And he could see.

"The incinerator has been busy today," one of the droids commented as they began to stride quickly down the tunnel. "Much organic matter to feed on."

"Human scum," the second droid retorted. They stumbled as another blast rocked the fortress.

Boba blinked. *Good thing I've still got my helmet on*, he thought. *Otherwise they might notice my eyes are open.*

He tried to find his bearings as the droids bore him down, down, down through a series of long, twisting passages. Glowing lumens showed where the fortress walls had sustained considerable damage from the Republic's assault. Shattered droids were everywhere, as well as glowing heaps of molten metal.

*Wonder who has the upper hand now?* Boba thought. He hated the Jedi, but General Glynn-Beti had helped him gain entry into Mazariyan. The last Boba had seen of the battle, the Republic's troops were putting up a good fight against the Separatists. If Wat Tambor's forces had been weakened by the battle, it would be that much easier for Boba to escape and find his way back to his ship, *Slave I*.

But first he had to avoid being tossed into Wat Tambor's furnace!

## Elizabeth Hand

He took a chance and flexed one of his hands. His strength was returning. As it did, the pain from Grievous's blast began to subside.

*My body armor must've absorbed most of the blow*, Boba thought gratefully. He could feel himself growing stronger, more alert. It was a real effort not to move and strike out at the droids.

But while sensation was slowly returning to his body, he still felt slightly groggy. His reflexes would not be as keen as they should be.

And he had no idea who, or what, he might encounter inside the fortress.

*Better wait...* he thought.

"This way," one of the droids announced. Boba did his best not to flinch as they made a sudden turn and began to descend down a steep incline. The darkness took on an unmistakable reddish tinge. Inside his Mandalorian body armor, Boba started to sweat.

*The good news is that I've recovered enough from that fungus to feel the heat*, he thought with grim amusement. *And the bad news? This must be the incinerator!*

Around him, everything glowed as though it were molten. The droids' shining silver limbs burned crimson and gold. The heat was intense and painful. A slight adjustment of his body armor's thermostatic cooling system would take care of that, but Boba didn't dare move to change it.

Not yet, anyway. He turned his head ever so slightly, praying that his helmet would hide any apparent motion from his droid captors. They seemed to take no notice.

"Wat Tambor will be departing shortly," one of the droids stated in its flat voice. "He wished to be informed when the spy was disposed of."

"Disposal is imminent," the other droid replied.

Boba stared through his helmet's visor as the droids carried him the last few steps to their destination. They were in a large, nearly airless room, devoid of any equipment or furnishings. A

few meters away shone an incandescent square of light, blinding and seemingly as hot as the sun. Heat radiated from it in shimmering waves. A conveyor belt, the room's sole machinery, moved slowly toward the incinerator's opening.

*Talk about too hot to handle*, thought Boba. Sweat trickled down his face, stinging his eyes. He couldn't move to wipe it away. Beneath him, the droids stopped. Their servogrips remained in place, holding Boba above their heads. He took a deep breath, then tightened his muscles until his body went taut.

*Have to risk it—hope they don't notice!*

The droids remained oblivious. In front of them the conveyor belt moved slowly, steadily, toward the incinerator.

And now Boba could see other shapes on it. Mangled knots of metal and plasteel, all that remained of damaged droids, and—shocking Boba—lifeless bundles of body armor, flesh, and charred weaponry.

*Clones*, he thought, and felt a stab of mingled pity and horror. Helmets covered their faces, but Boba knew what he would see if their body armor was removed—

His father Jango's face. His own face...for Jango had been the template from which all the clones had been built. Including Boba, the only unaltered clone.

"Shall we retain its armor and helmet?" One of the droids asked as it hoisted Boba. Its servogrip tugged at his weapons belt. "These are not organic. They are of fine quality."

*You bet they are!* Boba gritted his teeth. It took every bit of willpower to keep from lunging at the droids now; but their hold on him was still too strong. *Gotta wait till the last possible moment...*

"Our orders were to dispose of it completely," the second droid stated. "It is time we returned and gave our report."

The first droid's servogrip retracted. Boba allowed himself a silent sigh of relief. He felt himself being lifted higher, until he was poised directly above the conveyor belt. The incinerator's mouth was close enough that he could feel its heat through his reinforced boots. He stared down and watched as the conveyor

## Elizabeth Hand

brought one of the lifeless clones to the furnace's opening. For an instant the gray-clad form seemed to hang in the air, silhouetted black against white-gold flames. There was a flare of scarlet, a thread of black smoke—and it was gone.

*Nothing can withstand that heat!* Boba took a deep breath. The air was so hot it was like inhaling molten lava.

Boba thought of all the things he hadn't done yet. The vows he had made: to become the greatest bounty hunter the galaxy had ever known, and to seek revenge on the Jedi who had killed Jango Fett.

He vowed once more to see these things through.

"Ready," one of the droids said.

"Ready," agreed its partner. Without a sound, they flung Boba toward the belt.

For a moment he hung in the air, limp as the dead things beneath him. Then with a wordless shout Boba straightened, launching himself toward the droids. With a satisfying *thunk!* his boots connected with the droids' heads. They went sprawling, and Boba landed behind them before they could recover.

*Good thing these worker droids are unarmed.*

"Alert Wat Tambor!" one of them commanded. Its insectoid photoreceptors flashed from green to red as they surveyed Boba. "There has been a breach on Level Three. Organic matter has reanimated. Request backup immedi—"

"That's your last request!" Boba yelled.

He drew his blaster, staggering slightly. *Still unsteady from that toxin!* He caught himself, leveling a charge that sent the first droid reeling backward onto the moving belt. The second swiveled. It, too, was unarmed, but Boba could hear a blast of static as it attempted to send an alarm signal from its voculator.

"Things sure are heating up around here!" Boba kicked out at the second droid. It collapsed against the side of the conveyor. Before it could move again, Boba blasted it. Remnants of plasteel and sensors rained down onto the conveyor belt, as the first



droid was borne into the furnace. “I think it’s time I checked out—”

He shoved his blaster back into his belt and turned. Behind him was an opening.

*That must be how I got here. A shrill alarm sounded. And it looks like it’s how I better leave—now!*

He ran through the opening into a narrow passage. Muted thunder came from outside. The floor beneath him shook. Boba looked around but saw no signs of life anywhere; only piles of rubble where the Republic’s fire had damaged the fortress walls. The passage went in only one direction, so he began to run swiftly, one gloved hand resting lightly on his blaster.

*I’ve got to find Wat Tambor, he thought with grim determination. If he gets away...*

Boba quickly pushed that thought aside. He had been sent to Xagobah to capture Wat Tambor and bring him back to Jabba the Hutt, dead or alive.

Failure was not an option.

## CHAPTER THREE

Boba had no idea how to find his way out of Wat Tambor's fortress, let alone find the Foreman of the Separatist's Techno Union before he fled Xagobah. He continued to follow the passage as it twisted and turned, gradually climbing toward one of Mazariyan's upper levels. Welcome cool air flowed past him, and Boba inhaled gratefully.

*You never know how much you miss breathing till you've been dead,* he thought wryly.

He came to a spot where the tunnel forked. Here he paused. It was easier to breathe now; easier to do everything. The xabar's toxins had finally worn off.

But Boba couldn't blame everything on the toxin. He inspected his body armor and noted where it had been damaged by Grievous's assault. As he ran a hand over his arm he winced.

*That was a bad one,* he thought. A surface wound; but Grievous's weaponry and lightsabers had managed to tear right through the Mandalorian body armor. *Better make sure I treat th—*

*KARAM!*

With a cry Boba fell backward. Blinding heat surrounded him. With one hand he gripped his blaster, moving carefully to see what had happened.

One entire side of the fortress was gone. Where moments before the tunnel's wall had curved, now there was only empty air, a scorched ring of rock and metal, and the slimy, organic mass Wat Tambor had bioengineered from Xagobah's native fungi. Warily, Boba approached the opening and peered out.

Below, all was chaos. The main entrance to Mazariyan had been breached. Clone troopers stormed through a huge gaping hole, tendrils of smoke still rising from its edges.

"Whoa," Boba said in grudging admiration. "That was the explosion I felt back there in the tunnel! The Republic must've used a thermal detonator to blow their way in. Man, I'd love to get my hands on one of those...."

He stared down to where clone troopers ran between the fortress and an AT-TE—a Republic all-terrain-tactical-enforcer. A pall of smoke hung above the ground, mingling with the purplish spores that pervaded Xagobah's atmosphere. At the edge of the clearing that surrounded Mazariyan, blasted malviltrees oozed and burned. Flames licked up from the ruins of an immense hailfire droid. There were blasted spider droids and battle droids. The charred remnants of a Fromm tower droid were scattered across the ground like the ruins of a small city. A few beleaguered battle droids still made their way across the battlefield, firing relentlessly as the clones rushed toward and past them.

It was clear that the Republic now had the upper hand.

"Wat Tambor must have given the signal to retreat," Boba muttered. "He came here to regroup after he escaped from the Republic. Now that Glynn-Beti's tracked him to his lair, he's got no reason to stick around."

Boba craned his neck to look into the sky. Sure enough, airspeeders and even a few Jedi starfighters crisscrossed the violet haze, as though searching for someone.

*Wat Tambor, thought Boba. And they better not find him before I do!*

A sudden blast of laser fire ricocheted from the ruined wall beside him. Boba ducked back inside the gaping hole.

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“That was way too close.” He peered out. Far below, a clone trooper was pointing up to where Boba had stood just seconds ago. Before the trooper could alert others to his presence, Boba whipped out his weapon and sent a return blast flaring through the smoke. The clone trooper fell, a blackened hole where his chest had been.

“Time to get back to *Slave I*,” Boba said. He reached back to touch a small squarish object mounted near his weapons belt. As a matter of caution, he’d left his primary jet pack back on the ship. But he still had his liquid-cable launcher.

*Good thing, too. It’s a long, long way down.*

He stepped cautiously out onto the edge of the blasted wall. Below, the Republic’s troops continued to mill about the battleground. But most of the clones now seemed to be leaving the fortress, heading back to their troop carriers. Boba shaded his eyes, adjusting his helmet so that he could better focus through the smoke and spore-haze.

“There.” His gloved hand stabbed at the air. “That’s Glynn-Beti’s airspeeder...”

He watched as the Jedi general drew her craft closer to the AT-TE at the clearing’s edge. Glynn-Beti had helped him earlier on Xagobah, after Boba had saved her reckless young apprentice, Ulu Ulix, from certain death.

But Boba knew better than to expect any mercy from her now. And the mere thought of the Jedi made Boba’s gut tighten with anger.

*That Jedi scum Mace Windu murdered my father*, he thought. He glanced back at the corpse of the clone trooper he’d killed in self-defense minutes ago. The clone’s helmet had rolled away from his slack face.

Jango Fett’s face.

Boba’s expression grew grim. He stared back at the AT-TE. The diminutive figure of General Glynn-Beti had dismounted from the airspeeder and was now approaching the vehicle.

“She’ll be giving orders to her crew,” Boba said. “Now’s my chance....”

Raising his arms slightly, he leaped from the fortress wall and launched the liquid-cable, which hooked to a faraway tree. The ground rushed toward him. He could smell burning metal and the stink of charred fungus. Wind and smoke flashed past him as Boba Fett swung above the battlefield, heading toward the forest that hid his ship—and freedom!

## CHAPTER FOUR

“There!” From the ground far below Boba, came a sudden shout. “A spy! Fire on him!”

Boba twisted to look down. A knot of clone troopers was running from the AT-TE, pointing up at him as they drew their weapons.

*This secondary jet pack’s only good for a short sprint. Can’t waste time firing on them!* Boba thought with regret. He yanked his jet pack’s thruster to full force and tore through the air, blaster fire echoing at his heels. Just a few yards ahead of him was the forest of immense mushroomlike trees. *Now if I can just get undercover—*

A blaze of laser fire ripped through the trees closest to him. Debris and fungal ooze rained down on Boba as he steered his way beneath the canopy. As the violet shadows closed around him, he grabbed his own blaster and turned, sending a sudden volley back toward the ground. Two of the clone troopers fell. The other raced toward the forest, only to stop abruptly as a clear voice echoed from the AT-TE.

“Hold your fire!”

Boba grabbed hold of a malvil-tree branch and swung himself onto it, catching his breath. He looked down and saw the clones returning to the AT-TE. A small uniformed figure stared back at the forest. Even at this distance, Boba could feel the force of

Glynn-Beti's piercing gaze upon him. He stared back, bold and unafraid, then turned and used the jet pack to bring himself back down to ground level.

"Just in time," he said as he touched down. He heard the familiar droning sound of the auxiliary jet pack's fuel cell expiring. He shut it off, keeping his hand on his blaster, and began to run. His shoulder ached from Grievous's wound, but he ignored the pain.

*Got to get airborne before Wat Tambor does....*

The forest was a tangled mass of fungus and ropy vines. Boba made his way carefully through the trees, his weapon at the ready. Now and then he glanced over his shoulder for signs of pursuit.

But he saw no one. *There must be a mass exodus from this place*, he thought. *The Republic and Separatists alike. That means Xagobah will finally be given back to the Xamsters....*

Boba felt a small pulse of relief, recalling the natives of Xagobah who had helped him when he first arrived on-planet. The gentle Xamsters had suffered under Wat Tambor's reign, either killed outright or forced to fight against the Republic. Now, at last, they would be free again.

After a few minutes Boba's steps slowed. Around him the malvil-trees grew thickly, undamaged by warfare. Somewhere, behind these huge mushroom-like plants, *Slave I* waited, hidden by its cloaking device.

Boba stopped, listening for any sounds of pursuit.

Nothing. He touched the sensor on his weapons belt, deactivating the cloaking device. There was a low hum. Then the sleek outlines of his starship took shape in the small clearing in front of him. Boba allowed himself a rare smile.

"Good to see you again," he murmured.

He walked slowly around *Slave I*, inspecting the ship for any signs of damage. But *Slave I* had weathered its time on Xagobah better than Boba had. He checked the missile launcher under its concealed panel and made sure the blaster cannons hadn't been

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affected by Xagobah's humid atmosphere. Then, with a quick look around to make sure he was unobserved, he boarded his ship.

Inside, everything was as he had left it. He took off his helmet and set it alongside the control console. Then he grabbed a medpac and slapped a dermibandage onto his wounded shoulder. The repairs to his body armor would have to wait. He slid into the cockpit console and prepared for departure. As *Slave P's* motors hummed to life, Boba did a fast scan of his tracking computer. A set of coordinates flashed onto the screen, along with the image of a *Hardcell*-class interstellar transport—

Wat Tambor's ship.

"Gotcha!" Boba cried in triumph. More information scrolled across his monitor.

VESSEL REGISTERED WITH TECHNO UNION. VESSEL DEPARTURE IMMINENT.

"Time to go," said Boba. He programmed *Slave P's* tracking device to monitor Tambor's ship, then hit the thrusters. Like an arrow loosed from a taut bow, *Slave I* shot into the air. Xagobah's murky atmosphere surrounded the ship, but the flickering image of Wat Tambor's vessel shone clearly from the computer screen. Within moments, *Slave I* had cleared the atmosphere and entered the familiar star-shot darkness of space.

Behind the control console, Boba stared determinedly out at the expanse of stars. He observed the stationary mass of the Republic's troopship, and a single flare of light like a beacon: Wat Tambor's ship.

"Don't bother trying to run," he said as *Slave I* shot off in pursuit of the craft. "No escape for you."

Wat Tambor's ship was designed for interstellar transport, not fighting. That gave Boba the advantage—or so he thought. He got the Techno Union foreman's vessel in his sights, bringing *Slave I* as close as he dared before firing.

BLAAAAAMMM!



One of Boba's laser cannons released its payload: two large blasts of compressed atomic energy.

"Sorry, Jabba," Boba crowed. "You said 'dead or alive,' but it looks like you're gonna have to settle for dead...."

He angled *Slave I* to the side, hoping for a better view of Wat Tambor's destruction. But the wily foreman hadn't spent all those years with the Techno Union for nothing. As Boba stared in dismay, a shimmering deflector shield seemed to swallow Tambor's ship like a vast cloud. At the same time, a sleekly shining concussion missile streaked from the transport. A moment later, a second missile followed. The first missile's homing sensor sent it racing toward Boba's energy bolt. There was a blinding flash as it impacted, and Boba muttered under his breath. Concussive waves rippled through the depths of space. *Slave I* shuddered.

But Boba wasted no time on anger or regret. The second missile's tracking sensors had locked into *Slave I*—the missile was heading right toward him. *Slave I* shot up and sideways. The missile swerved and followed. Before it could strike its target, Boba loosed a volley from his blaster cannons.

"How 'bout this, Tambor?" he challenged.

He heard the satisfying *thnnk* of impact. Nanoseconds later, the missile imploded.

But there was more enemy fire coming! Boba withdrew *Slave I* to a better firing range, then blasted the enemy vessel.

"If I can just weaken his deflector shield," said Boba, his console tilting forward as he took aim and fired. "Then go in for the kill!"

Pinwheels of energy flared and pulsed around Wat Tambor's ship. Retaliatory blasts echoed around *Slave I*, but Boba was too fast—

*KARRAAM!*

A jaw-rattling blast as Wat Tambor scored a hit, penetrating Boba's shield defenses. He glanced quickly at the monitor, saw nothing serious. His face tightened with fury as *Slave I* soared

## Elizabeth Hand

toward the enemy ship. He waited until the last possible moment, then fired.

*BLAM!*

A hit! Boba whooped as Wat Tambor's vessel rocked dangerously. He'd breached the defense shield! Boba's hand hovered above the console panel. Another moment and he'd have a clear shot—and Wat Tambor would be his!

*Tatooine, here I come!*

At that moment, something streaked into view. Another vessel, whipping past Wat Tambor's ship like a ghostly flame. Boba sucked his breath in sharply.

*I know that ship!*

He'd heard about it on Tatooine, listening to the other bounty hunters recount firefights and acts of cold savagery directed against the Jedi.

*Asajj Ventress*, Boba thought. He watched as her starship swooped closer.

Asajj! She might have been the only other person in the galaxy who hated the Jedi as much as he did. Raised on the hostile, rapacious world of Rattatak, Asajj had been trained by a young Jedi marooned on her terrible planet. Ky Narec had been not only stranded on Rattatak—he had been effectively abandoned by his Masters, who had never sought to aid the young Jedi—or his protégé, Asajj, who longed to escape her cruel homeworld.

But the Jedi never came. Asajj never had the chance to prove herself to them, or to anyone but her mentor. And when Ky Narec died, Asajj vowed to avenge herself upon the Jedi. Allying herself with Count Dooku, Asajj had become one of the Republic's fiercest and most deadly opponents. Her control of the Force was exceptional, but her rage was overwhelming, as were her combat skills...and her prowess with a starship. Boba watched with ungrudging admiration as Asajj's vessel cleaved through space.

*What an ally she would be!* he thought. *We could take on Mace Windu together.*

No. Boba shook his head.

*Mace Windu is mine alone*, he thought, feeling a spike of rage. *No one will deny me vengeance. No one...*

A barrage of blasts shattered his thoughts. Barely a klick away, Asajj Ventress's ship was hurtling right toward *Slave I*.

*She thinks I'm part of the Republic force! Slave I* shot upward as Boba outmaneuvered Asajj. *If only she knew the truth!*

But the truth would be wasted on Asajj Ventress. She was here as part of Wat Tambor's backup force. And at this moment, she knew only one thing:

An unknown ship was firing on the Techno Union foreman.

And whoever piloted that spacecraft was going to die.

## CHAPTER FIVE

*BRRRAAK!*

A deafening roar from Asajj Ventress's ion cannons shook *Slave I*. Frantically, Boba fired back at Ventress's ship.

But she was far too fast. As he watched, her ship vaulted over *Slave I*. Before he could fire back, Ventress's laser cannons released a barrage of energy blasts.

*BAM!*

A direct hit!

Boba was nearly jolted from his console. He sent a rain of return fire, but it was too late. *Slave I* vibrated furiously as a second plasma blast hit home.

*Gotta get away*, Boba thought grimly. *Can't lose Wat Tambor...*

*Slave I* shot after the Separatist's vessel.

And Asajj Ventress shot after *Slave I*. Boba piloted his ship up, angling until Asajj was directly below him. He checked that *Slave I*'s mines were primed, then sent an ion mine whirling toward her.

*BLAM!*

"Yes!"

But immediately Boba's yelp of triumph turned to disappointment, as the mine ricocheted harmlessly from Ventress's defense field, to spin off into space. At the same

moment, a burst of retaliatory ion fire blazed from Asajj's cannons.

*BRAAK!*

Boba groaned as *Slave I* rocked sharply to starboard. He fired back, but once more Asajj was too quick. He let the ship veer to one side, hoping to buy a few precious seconds as he checked the damage.

A glance at *Slave P*'s repair files gave him the bad news. Some of the outer panels had been loosened. Serious damage, but not fatal.

The starboard wing was another story. Two of the fins shielding the repulsor grilles had been destroyed. Without them, *Slave I* was crippled—he could fly, but his nav skills were seriously impaired. Worse, landing the ship would be a real problem—

Not that he could even think about landing now!

*BAM!*

Another hit for Asajj. Boba fired off two missiles, had the satisfaction of seeing one rip into the side of her starfighter. A starburst of plasma glowed gold and white, then faded.

"No." Boba scowled. Asajj's defense shields had absorbed the blow. And Wat Tambor's transport remained unscathed.

"Time for a new tactic," Boba muttered.

He punched a series of commands into his console. A grid popped onto a monitor, displaying the coordinates of an asteroid belt not far off. If he could lure Asajj there, he might have a better chance of losing her. Then he could make a swift pass back toward Wat Tambor....

He set *Slave P*'s thrusters to maximum. The ship veered toward the asteroid field.

And right into Asajj Ventress's line of fire!

Boba retaliated, trying to dodge Ventress's attack. But the damage done to *Slave P*'s starboard wing slowed him too much. As he made one last-ditch attempt to fire, a flaming burst from

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Ventress's ion cannon blazed toward him. Desperately, Boba tried to avoid the blast.

*BLLAAAAMM!*

With a cry Boba yanked at the thruster. But it was no good.

*Slave I* was finished.

## CHAPTER SIX

With a screaming roar, Boba's ship fell into a nosedive. He hit the backup thrusters, momentarily righting *Slave I*, then looked up.

He expected to see Asajj's ship looming before him—or, worse, another blinding blast from her ion cannons.

What he didn't expect to see was a Jedi starfighter.

"Whoa!" Boba let out a gasp of disbelief. "That's Anakin Skywalker!"

He had seen the legendary Jedi apprentice twice now, both times from a distance. Most recently, Boba had watched as Skywalker successfully destroyed a Separatist ramship on Xagobah. Skywalker's combat skill was as keen as his defiance—and both were attributes Boba admired.

"He's driving off Ventress!" Boba said in disbelief.

Skywalker's starfighter took after Asajj's ship like a winged turnor attacking its prey. As Boba watched, the young Jedi fired a volley of precision blasts, each one finding its target—Asajj Ventress!

The battle was over almost as quickly as it had begun. Asajj's starship raced away from Skywalker. Boba shook his head in admiration and faint disappointment.

*She hardly put up a fight at all!*

## Elizabeth Hand

He craned his neck, following her—and saw why she'd fled so quickly.

Wat Tambor's transport vessel was glowing, radiant white as though consumed by a sun's heat. Boba only had time to groan, as the transport seemed to billow and burst...

And made the jump into hyperspace.

*It was all a diversion!* Boba fumed, furious at himself. *Asajj wanted to distract me so that Wat Tambor could escape—*

"And she succeeded!" he said angrily. "How could I have been so stupid? Well, it'll never happen again...."

He'd be sure of that! Boba might make mistakes—but he never made the same one twice.

Especially not with Jabba the Hutt wanting results.

Boba's expression grew somber at the thought of the notorious gangster. Wat Tambor could be anywhere in the galaxy by now. Boba had no way of knowing where. And, with *Slave I* damaged, no way of following—

"IDENTIFY YOURSELF!"

Boba started as a crackle of static came through *Slave I*'s speakers.

"IDENTIFY YOURSELF OR BE DESTROYED!"

Boba stabbed at the console panel. "Identify *yourself*!" he countered.

"ANAKIN SKYWALKER, OF THE REPUBLIC'S XAGOBAB PEACEKEEPING FORCE. I HAVE ORDERS TO DESTROY ALL SEPARATIST VESSELS WITHIN THIS AIRSPACE. YOU HAVE TEN SECONDS TO IDENTIFY YOURSELF OR RISK DESTRUCTION. TEN. NINE...."

*Gotta stall!* Boba thought. Identifying himself as a mercenary bounty hunter wouldn't go over too well with Skywalker.

But the young Jedi was part of the Republic force that had driven Wat Tambor from Xagobab. Maybe he would have some idea as to where the Techno Union foreman had fled—information that Boba could use to track Wat Tambor down himself, and still claim Jabba's bounty...



“...FOUR. THREE....”

*I better be fast, thought Boba. And I better be good!*

“Skywalker—this is a request for assistance!” he announced into the comm unit. Boba knew this was the Jedi’s weak spot—they could never resist being the good guys. “My ship was damaged in a firefight with Asajj Ventress—repeat, request assistance immediately....”

Silence. In front of him, Anakin’s starship hovered like a silver flame. As he spoke, Boba punched in a set of coordinates. A navscreen flickered to life—and there was the information Boba needed.

Just beyond the asteroid belt, a small moon orbited Xagobah. *If I can get there, I can repair the starboard wing. And once I lose this Jedi, I can get back on Wat Tambor’s trail....*

Anakin’s voice once more boomed through the comm unit.

“WE HAVE NO RECORD OF A SEPARATIST VESSEL FITTING YOUR DESCRIPTION,” he announced. He almost sounded disappointed. “NOR DO WE HAVE RECORDS INDICATING YOU ARE PART OF THE REPUBLIC’S PEACEKEEPING FORCE—”

“I fought on the side of the Xamsters,” Boba broke in quickly. That was true enough. “And now I’m heading for that moon to make repairs. So—”

Keeping a close watch on the Jedi starfighter, Boba began to slowly bank *Slave I* toward the moon.

“—if you’ll just let me go, I can get my job done—and so can you.”

Boba knew he was taking a risk. There was no way he could outfly Skywalker now, not with *Slave I*’s shattered wing—though once that was repaired, he’d give him a run for his credits!

*Plus, Skywalker must have better things to do than waste time with an injured mercenary!* thought Boba. Then he looked up.

Hmmm. Apparently not—Anakin’s streamlined starfighter filled *Slave I*’s viewscreen.

## Elizabeth Hand

“MY SHIP WILL ESCORT YOU,” Anakin said. He made the simple statement sound like an order. “IF YOU CHANGE COURSE, YOUR SHIP WILL BE DESTROYED.”

“I’ll try not to forget that,” Boba snapped—after he’d switched off the comm unit.

He reset *Slave I*’s coordinates and headed for the moon. It looked barren and uninhabited, its surface pocked with craters. The atmosphere was thin, but it would sustain human life-forms—for a little while, anyway.

Boba intended to be there only a short time. He scoped out a narrow valley between two craters and prepared *Slave I* for landing. Skywalker’s ship trailed him, close enough that Boba couldn’t have eluded him if he’d tried.

Somehow, that didn’t seem like a good idea at the moment.

Boba throttled down, and *Slave I* began its final descent. Boba watched impassively as Skywalker’s ship followed him like a shining shadow. Within minutes *Slave I* had touched down. Seconds later the starfighter did the same.

“STAY WHERE YOU ARE,” a voice crackled through the base comm unit.

Boba snorted. No way he was going to stay here like a placid Khommite strider, just waiting to be picked off! He checked his weapons belt, making sure his blasters were well-concealed. Then he grabbed his helmet and started for the door.

And stopped.

Boba’s Mandalorian battle helmet had belonged to his father, Jango Fett, before he was killed by Mace Windu. For the last few years Boba had worn it, along with his father’s body armor. Even after all this time, Boba missed his father terribly; the armor was one of the few legacies Jango had left to his son. Boba wore it with pride and skill. Jango’s helmet and armor had become a dreaded sight to all whom Boba hunted down.

But did Boba want to be recognized right now?

For a moment he brooded. He was here now because a high-ranking member of the Republic had paid off Jabba, requesting

that the Huttese gangster have one of his bounty hunters track down and kill Wat Tambor. The Republic wanted Wat Tambor's death to appear to be the work of a lone assassin. And Jabba had known that only his best bounty hunter—Boba Fett—would be able to kill the wily Techno Union foreman.

But Boba had failed. So far, anyway.

Anakin Skywalker was leading Republic troops in their continuing strife with the Separatists. What if he knew of Boba's mission? If word got back to Jabba the Hutt, Boba's reputation would be ruined!

More than his reputation—his life.

*And I have kind of a sentimental attachment to that,* Boba thought.

He looked at the Mandalorian helmet, then glanced out the viewscreen. Anakin Skywalker was clambering down from his starfighter. Puffs of sand rose as his booted feet made contact with the moon's surface. He paused to give his starfighter a cursory damage inspection, then turned and headed for *Slave I*.

Boba took a deep breath. Reluctantly he removed his helmet—for now.

"This is only temporary," he said, catching a glimpse of himself in the dark viewscreen. He looked grim and determined, a younger, rangier version of his father. The superficial resemblance he bore to Jango Fett's clones had long since been etched away by strife and battle. A clone didn't survive long enough to wear his experiences upon his face.

But years of hunting and killing had hardened Boba's expression. He smiled seldom these days. When he did, it was usually when he saw his friend Ygabba and her father, Gab'borah, back on Tatooine.

But he wasn't on Tatooine now. And he wasn't going to return there until he could report Wat Tambor's death or capture to Jabba the Hutt.

Inside the ship, a low, warning note signaled the arrival of an intruder. The young bounty hunter disengaged the alarm, then opened the exit bay.

## **Elizabeth Hand**

One hand resting lightly upon his weapons belt, the other poised above his blaster, Boba Fett strode out to meet Anakin Skywalker.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

The surface of the moon was chill and stark—nearly as cold and relentless as the gaze of the young man who awaited Boba Fett. As the bounty hunter descended, he sized up the Jedi. Like Boba, much of Anakin Skywalker’s youthfulness had been burned away by combat and hardship. He was taller than Boba, clad in a young Jedi’s distinctive tunic, modified to suit his tastes, and knee-high boots, with unkempt hair down to his shoulders. He had a Jedi’s bearing and discipline, a Jedi’s skill, and a Jedi’s lightsaber at his side.

But the arrogance that Boba saw in Anakin’s eyes was not the mark of a Jedi. Nor was Anakin’s impatience. Boba kept his own dark eyes alert and mistrustful, and left one hand on his blaster as he walked down from his craft.

The two were well-matched. Boba was strong and powerfully built, if lacking somewhat in Anakin’s agility. Nor did the young bounty hunter have the Jedi’s extreme pride. Pride took energy—energy better invested in concentration and cunning. In this matter, at least, Boba had the upper hand.

“That was good flying you did back there,” Boba said. His expression remained aloof, but he inclined his head slightly, acknowledging Anakin’s skill. “You probably saved me.”

Anakin looked slightly taken aback. But he recovered quickly.

## Elizabeth Hand

“Probably?” he asked, raising an eyebrow. “More like *definitely*.” He looked past Boba to Slave I’s starboard wing. “You took quite a hit,” he said, then added grudgingly, “but you put up a good fight, too. Asajj is a deadly enemy. Not many have survived an encounter with her. You were lucky—Boba Fett.”

Now it was Boba’s turn to look surprised. His body tensed instinctively, ready to spring into action if he had to.

But Anakin only continued to regard him with the same cool, appraising gaze. “Yes. I know who you are—and have for a long time. My Master, Obi-Wan Kenobi, has spoken of you.”

Boba felt his stomach clench. Obi-Wan Kenobi! Boba and his father had escaped from the hated Jedi back on their homeworld, Kamino. Could Kenobi have been the one to order Wat Tambor’s assassination?

Boba looked warily at Anakin. He half-expected to hear the young Jedi speak of Boba’s failure to capture the Separatist mastermind.

Instead, Anakin was looking at Boba thoughtfully, as though he were a chess piece on a playing board.

“Yes, I have heard of you,” Anakin went on at last. “And I have seen you, as well—back there on Xagobah, when you saved Glynn-Beti’s apprentice. That was brave. And reckless.” The slightest smile tugged at Anakin’s mouth, and he released his hold on his lightsaber. “Nice work.”

“Thanks.” Boba felt himself relax a little. He turned, glancing under *Slave I* to see what damage there was that he had missed.

“It mostly seems to be the wing,” said Anakin. He strode past Boba and crouched to inspect it more closely. “See here? Looks like the struts were weakened to begin with. And this—”

Boba watched, amused, as Anakin crawled under his ship. The Jedi pulled a small toolkit from his tunic.

“—this really should have been taken care of a long time ago. How long has it been since you’ve had this ship serviced?”

Boba shrugged. He thought of Qinx, his mechanic back on Tatooine, and Boba’s longstanding request to have *Slave I*’s shield

upgraded and his exterior weapons systems overhauled. "Too long, probably," he answered.

"That's for sure." Anakin shook his head. He ran his hand along one of the ship's thruster nozzles. "You've done a lot of the work on this yourself, haven't you?"

"I've made some improvements."

"Quite a few, it looks like." Anakin flashed Boba a rare look of admiration. "This is good work. It's a good ship. And you're lucky the damage wasn't worse. I can probably get this wing straightened out without too much trouble."

Anakin hesitated. Probably wondering what Obi-Wan would say of this.

A Jedi should never let down his guard, Boba answered in his head. *A Jedi's loyalty is to the Order first, then to the Republic....*

Abruptly, Anakin's keen blue gaze fixed on Boba. "Don't try anything, Fett. I've got full backup from Glynn-Beti." Anakin ran a hand along his lightsaber. "Not that I'd need her help."

Boba ignored the implied threat. "I've got work to do myself," he said roughly. Grimacing, he touched his wounded shoulder.

"You better take care of that," said Anakin before turning his attention back to *Slave I*.

"And my body armor," said Boba, more to himself than the Jedi. He started back up the gangway to his ship. Suddenly he halted, frowning. "Did you hear that?"

"Huh?" Anakin's muffled voice drifted from behind the starboard wing.

Boba stood on alert, listening. His keen eyes took in the barren moonscape: pale reddish sand carved into funnels and outcroppings like ruined towers or the remains of other, wasted spacecraft. Between large craters, smaller tunnels yawned, black as the star-scattered sky beyond.

But there was no sign of life. No one but Boba Fett and Anakin Skywalker moved in this desolate place.

"Nothing," Boba said. "Must've just been my imagination."

## Elizabeth Hand

He went back into *Slave I*. Inside, all was silent, save for the sound of Anakin hammering and working away at the battered wing. Gingerly, Boba tended to his injured shoulder, cleaning the wound and putting on fresh bandages.

Then he set about repairing his body armor.

Ygabba and Gab'borah had given it to him back on Tatooine—Jango Fett's own Mandalorian body armor and combat boots. The armor had been damaged by General Grievous, but it could be fixed. Boba examined it carefully, then got out his own repair kit and touch-up paint.

It felt good to be fixing his armor. Somehow, it made it feel more like it was Boba's own.

*It is mine*, he thought, smoothing out a jagged spot where Grievous' energy blast had charred the plasteel. Then he began repainting the armor, a slightly darker color than that favored by Jango. As he did, he made a few other adjustments, tightening here, lengthening there.

Boba knew his father would be proud of him. And he also knew that his father would understand.

Boba was his own man now. He had accepted Jango Fett's legacy. Not just his helmet and armor, not just the book Jango had left him, but Jango's wisdom and skill, his discipline and determination. All of these things had made Boba who he was now—

One of the best bounty hunters in the galaxy.

But Boba wasn't content with that. As he shrugged into his armor and fastened it across his chest, he thought of Jabba the Hutt. Jabba paid well—for a Hutt, anyway—but Boba wanted to strike out on his own.

*It's time*, he thought, pulling on his helmet. He straightened and looked at the reflection in a mirror.

A pang shot through him at what he saw there. He felt loss and love and grief, but also pride.

*I look like my father*, he thought. *I wish...I wish he could see me. He would be proud of me. I know that.*



## **STAR WARS: Pursuit**

The mirror showed a tall, broad-shouldered figure, face masked by the battle helmet; but his bearing and strength plain for anyone to see—

Boba Fett.

And he wasn't merely Jabba's prize assassin. Soon, Boba Fett would be the best bounty hunter the galaxy had known—

Ever.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

He strode back outside to check on Skywalker's repairs. In the doorway he paused again—

*That sound*, he thought. He listened, all his senses on edge. But the sound, whatever it was, had once again escaped him. He turned and hurried down to the moon's surface alongside his ship.

"How's it going?" Boba asked. He stooped to peer at *Slave I's* wing.

"Just about done." Anakin wiped a spot of grease from his cheek and took a step back. "What do you think?"

Boba ran his hand across the wing, whistling softly. "Wow. You can hardly tell it was damaged at all."

"That's right," said Anakin with pride.

But somehow, Skywalker's pride no longer looked so much like arrogance. It looked more like satisfaction, even happiness. For a moment he stood and admired his own work. Then he turned to Boba.

Now it was Anakin's turn to be impressed.

"Your armor looks good," he said admiringly. "Your helmet, too."

Boba shrugged. "In my line of work, you need it."

"Yeah," said Anakin with a nod. "I can see that."

For a moment the two young men stood in silence.

At last Boba said, “Thanks for helping me with the repairs on my ship. But I have an important job to do—”

“So do I.” Anakin cut him off. “You violated Republic airspace back there on Xagobah. All unauthorized personnel automatically become detainees of the Republic. You’re in my charge now.”

Boba’s hand twitched toward his blaster. Anakin’s did the same with his lightsaber. His steely eyes remained fixed on Boba.

“There’s no point in resisting,” Skywalker said calmly, though there was an edge of menace in his voice. “But I’ll put in a good word for you—”

Boba’s entire body tensed as he put himself into attack mode. Then he grimaced.

The injuries he’d sustained from Grievous were too great. Even as he moved, he could feel blood trickling from his wounded shoulder. The pain was excruciating—but he wouldn’t let Skywalker know that.

“—after I bring you in for questioning,” the Jedi finished. “I’m sure we can find a place for you to work within the Republic.”

Boba’s grimace deepened, though not from pain.

*No way!* he thought.

Working for the Republic was not an option. Working for anyone, except himself, was not an option! Jabba the Hutt might pay his bounties, but no one set limits on Boba Fett.

Not Jabba. Not the Republic.

And definitely not Anakin Skywalker.

But how to get away from the Jedi? Boba looked at the desolate moonscape surrounding them. Dunes, craters, depthless holes like horrible empty eyes or mouths on the lunar surface. He would find no refuge there.

No help, either...

He tried desperately to come up with a plan.

## Elizabeth Hand

*If only I hadn't taken such a hit from Grievous!* he thought. He flinched, recalling the encounter that had nearly killed him—that would have killed him, if Boba hadn't managed to use his wits to escape. He glanced at Anakin.

*I could take him, if I wasn't injured,* he thought grimly. *And if he didn't have a Republic army at his beck and call! I could still take him....*

As though the young Jedi could read Boba's mind, Anakin said, "Don't even think of escape, Fett. You're no match for me. Glynn-Beti's troopship is nearby. I'll bring you there, and she'll decide what's to be done with you."

"No—" Boba took a step toward Anakin. Skywalker's hand tightened around his weapon as Boba said, "I have a better idea."

Anakin regarded him suspiciously. "I warn you, if—"

"If nothing!" Boba snapped. "If you don't listen to me now, you're making a mistake."

Anakin's eyes narrowed. "What are you talking about?"

The bounty hunter hesitated. Since his father's death, Boba had been sustained by two things. One was a burning rage to take vengeance on his father's murderer, Mace Windu.

The other was a secret that only Boba knew. It was something he had learned back when he was on the toxic planet, Raxus Prime. He had been brought there by the bounty hunter Aurra Sing. She had been hired to capture Boba, by someone known as "the Count."

The Count was in fact the deadly Separatist leader Count Dooku, enemy of the Republic. He was a former Jedi Master, who, like Boba, now hated the Jedi. Unlike Boba, Dooku had allied himself with the Separatists.

Yet only Boba knew that Count Dooku was the same person as the mysterious Tyranus...the same Tyranus who had first approached Jango Fett to become the source for the Republic's clone army...

The same Tyranus who was therefore also helping the Republic!

Boba had kept this information secret from the Republic and the Jedi—until now. He had his Mandalorian armor, and his helmet. He had some of the most sophisticated weapons in the galaxy. And he had *Slave I*, the best ship in the galaxy.

But right now, he knew that none of these things was as valuable as what he knew about the Count. His knowledge of the Count's secret was also a weapon. And at the moment, it was a weapon more powerful than anything else Boba possessed. He drew himself up and stared coldly at Anakin Skywalker.

*Knowledge is power, his father had taught him. Knowledge is a weapon—use it carefully, or pay the price!*

As he gazed at the threatening young Jedi before him, Boba hoped his knowledge wouldn't kill him.

## CHAPTER NINE

Boba straightened and met Anakin's gaze.

"I have information vital to the safety of the Republic," Boba said.

Anakin stared at him in cold disbelief. "You what?"

"You heard me." Boba glared back at the Jedi. "What I know could mean the difference between the Republic's defeat—or ultimate victory."

Anakin's grasp on his weapon loosened, ever so slightly. "How do I know you're telling the truth?"

Boba shrugged. "You don't. But if I am, the Republic could have the knowledge it needs to defeat the Separatists. And if you don't make use of it, the Republic could be destroyed. Are you willing to take that chance?"

Boba watched Anakin carefully. Whatever this Jedi was, he wasn't a coward. Or stupid. Anakin shook his head.

"Why should I believe you? You're just a worthless bounty hunter!"

"Not just any bounty hunter!" retorted Boba. "Think about it. You said that Obi-Wan Kenobi had spoken my name to you. Why would he bother telling you about me, unless I was important?"

Anakin frowned.

*Got him there!* thought Boba triumphantly. Before the Jedi could say more, Boba quickly went on.

"I need to go to Coruscant." The words were out almost before he knew what he was saying. But as soon as he did, he realized that they were right. "What I know can only be shared with the highest authority. If you try to stop me, you will be accused of treason."

"Coruscant?" For a second, Boba had the satisfaction of seeing Anakin's confidence falter. But only for an instant. "There's no place on Coruscant for a bounty hunter like you! No one will meet with you. No one important, anyway."

"That's where you're wrong," said Boba. Even as he spoke, he could feel his mouth go dry. He was taking a gamble, maybe the most perilous risk he had taken in his entire life. "Someone will meet me there. Someone important. Someone powerful..."

"Who?" demanded Anakin angrily.

Boba took a deep breath. He knew he was taking more than his luck in his hands.

He was taking his life.

Anakin took a step closer to Boba. "Tell me!"

Boba put his hand on his blaster, defying Anakin to come nearer.

"Supreme Chancellor Palpatine," he said.

Anakin froze. His eyes widened.

"The Chancellor?!"

Boba nodded. "That's right."

"But—"

Abruptly the world around them seemed to shatter. Rocks and waves of sand rained down. Boba shouted and dropped, scrambling for his blaster. Anakin fell, too. He rolled toward Boba, one arm raised protectively above the two of them.

"It's a space slug!" Anakin yelled. "Stay down!"

From a crater behind the Jedi starfighter, a vast shape emerged, blotting out the sky above them. Its huge, snakelike body shot through the air, boulders and great rocks flying

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everywhere in its wake. Its huge mouth yawned open, showing rows of teethlike blades as it twisted and lunged—

Straight toward Boba and Anakin!

Boba ducked, just in time, as a displaced boulder hurtled past him. The space slug roared.

“This’ll slow it!” shouted Anakin. He stood and grabbed for his lightsaber. But before he could draw it, a man-sized rock came hurtling toward him.

The rock smashed against Anakin. With a strangled cry, the young Jedi fell.

“Skywalker!” Boba shouted.

But he had no time to help the wounded Jedi.

The space slug was upon them!

Boba hefted his powerful DC-15 blaster. It lacked the scope of his bigger weapons, but he was in close range to his target now—

Very close!

“*WHHHOOOORAAAAAGGGH!*” the space slug roared. It was close enough that Boba could feel its hot breath, stinking of scorched rock and sand. And it was heading right toward *Slave I*!

“Get away from my ship!” Boba yelled furiously. He darted to one side of Slave I, stooping to pick up a rock. He hurled it at the predator.

*THUNK!*

The rock struck the predatory monster on its most vulnerable part—its eye.

“*RRRUAAAGHRRRR!*”

With a thunderous growl of pain and rage, the space slug changed its course in midair. It veered away from Boba’s ship—and the fallen Anakin—and surged in full pursuit of the bounty hunter!

Boba ran toward a small crater. It was way too small to hide Boba for more than a moment or two.



But that was all the time Boba needed to take aim. He crouched, his blaster leveled. He got a fix on the space slug's head—which was rapidly approaching!

"Can't miss!" Boba muttered through gritted teeth. From the corner of his eye he could see Anakin turn, groaning, and stumble to his feet. "Otherwise we're both dead—and I've got a score to settle with another Jedi!"

Once again the space slug's deafening roar rang out. Fragments of rock fell around Boba as the serpentine creature reared above him.

*BAAMMMM!*

Boba fired a direct hit—right between the eyes!

"GLOOORB!" The gigantic slug's roar rose to a bubbling shriek of pain. Its head swayed back and forth, giving Boba another chance to fire—and another!

"Yes!" Boba crowed.

Two more hits! The space slug writhed in agony. Its knife-edged teeth clashed as it recoiled from the bounty hunter. Greenish blood splattered Boba as the space slug retreated with a long, bubbling cry, sliding back into its hole.

"Yuck!" exclaimed Boba, wiping slug goo from his body armor. "Just after I got it all cleaned up, too!" He sheathed his weapon then removed his helmet, checking it for damage. Then he hurried toward his ship.

"That was pretty good."

Boba froze in his tracks. A few feet away Anakin stood, staring at him intently. Boba knew the Jedi was deciding what to do about him.

But he couldn't know what was going on in Skywalker's head. Did it matter that he'd just saved the Jedi's life? That this was the second time he'd saved a Jedi since he'd started the hunt for Wat Tambor?

Anakin shook his head, then looked Boba up and down as he approached.

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“Yeah, that was pretty good,” the Jedi repeated. “Not bad at all, considering.”

“Considering what?” snapped Boba. He stared challengingly at Skywalker. Boba really didn’t want to draw arms against this particular Jedi—but he wouldn’t hesitate if he had to.

“Considering you’re getting ready to set your course for Coruscant,” said Anakin.

“Huh?” It took a moment for the words to sink in. When they did, Boba allowed himself a small smile.

*Yes!*

But Boba was careful not to let his true emotions show outside of his mask. He had another, secret motive for going to Coruscant. And Skywalker could never learn what that was.

“Yes. You can go to Coruscant—under these conditions,” added Anakin. He gave *Slave P’s* repaired wing one last careful look. Then he headed toward his starfighter.

“I’ll give you the coordinates,” Anakin continued. “And the signal for takeoff. I’m handing you over to Governor Tarkin. He’ll escort you to the Chancellor. If you don’t like those conditions, you’re history. When you enter Coruscant airspace, follow his lead. And your weapons have to remain on your ship.”

Boba bristled. “Why?” he asked angrily. “I’m not your prisoner!”

“No, you’re not. But he knows Coruscant, and you don’t. I know who can be trusted—”

“I trust nobody,” said Boba. Already he had a plan for what he would really do on Coruscant. His eyes met Anakin’s unflinchingly. “No one but myself.”

Anakin looked at him. Then he nodded, turning to ready his ship for departure.

“We have a lot in common, Boba Fett,” he said as he clambered into his starfighter. “Perhaps we’ll meet again.”

## CHAPTER TEN

Coruscant!

Far below *Slave I*, the glittering planet stretched like a vast computer circuit, blinking and glowing with thousands of domes, towers, skyscrapers, airspeeders. The high-rises lifted into the sky, their brilliant lights blazing gold and silver and scarlet. The hazy atmosphere seemed bathed in eternal sunset. It was beautiful and impressive and very, very big.

Boba had never been to Coruscant. He knew that the planet was covered by a single vast metropolis, Galactic City. Galactic City housed the galactic government, overseen by Chancellor Palpatine. And in the shadow of Galactic City's looming towers sprawled the planet's great underworld. This was a seedy place where criminals held sway. Boba knew of it from Jabba the Hutt. The Hutt clan controlled a good part of Coruscant's black market, though a petty crime lord named Hat Lo managed things for them.

But something else was on Coruscant, too, something even more important to Boba—

The Jedi Temple, where the Jedi High Council met—and where Mace Windu could be found.

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“Mace is a senior member of the High Council,” Boba said to himself. “He will have dealings with Palpatine. Somehow I’ll use Palpatine to get to Mace Windu. And then...”

Boba thought of his father, slain by Windu. “And then, Father, we will be avenged,” he said softly. He promised himself this would be the one exception to the bounty hunter law he had established for himself. Never would he kill on his own time—except this time. For honor’s sake.

He sat at *Slave I*’s console. Not far away, Governor Tarkin’s starship hovered, awaiting landing clearance. But Boba had already made contact with someone who had deeper ties to Coruscant than Anakin Skywalker.

“Boba Fett!” A voice crackled through the interior of *Slave I*. Seconds later a face filled the ship’s viewscreen. It was the oily figure of Hat Lo, his pudgy frame encased in heavy protective shielding. “What brings you here?”

“Business,” said Boba tersely. Hat Lo liked to think that he was in charge of the Coruscant underworld. Boba knew better. Jabba was really in charge of things here. Hat Lo was merely his lackey.

Hat Lo wasn’t too smart, either. He’d be easy to exploit—if Boba was careful. “I have a few things to tend to,” said the bounty hunter.

“Hunting, eh?” A flicker of unease crossed Hat Lo’s overfed face. “Er, what kind of things are you tending to?”

“That’s my business. And Jabba’s,” Boba added pointedly.

“Jabba! Of course, of course,” blathered the man on the viewscreen. “I had no idea—”

Boba watched in satisfaction as Hat Lo’s fat face grew a shade paler. “I know I can count on you for any assistance I need while I’m here,” said Boba.

“Absolutely!” Hat Lo nearly groveled as he spoke. “Anything Jabba needs—er, anything *you* need—”

“Good. I’ll be in touch soon,” said Boba shortly, and ended the transmission.

Almost immediately Governor Tarkin's voice echoed through *Slave I*.

"We're cleared," he announced in a tone that Boba already felt sounded sinister. "We've received permission to land at the Jedi Temple, thanks to General Skywalker—that way you won't have to go through Coruscant security. Just let me do all the talking—and remember: no weapons."

"Right," growled Boba. He was glad he was wearing his helmet, so that Tarkin wouldn't see his anger at the request once they landed. "No weapons..."

None when he set foot on Coruscant, anyway. But once Boba was ready to leave Coruscant—

That would be another story.

They touched down on the broad, open landing platform of the Jedi Temple. Tarkin's vessel landed first, *Slave I* less than a minute later. From inside, Boba watched as a single slender figure clad in the Jedi's distinctive robes crossed to greet the governor, who was a rising star, it seemed, in the Clone Wars. Boba waited until the two were engaged in conversation. Then he quickly readied himself to join them.

But first he had to remove his weapons.

"I hate to leave you behind," he said with regret. "But I better not take any chances. I'm so close to finding Mace Windu—don't want to blow it now."

He removed the Westar-34 blasters from his weapons belt and his knee holsters, and put them safely away. Then he did the same with his missiles and dart shooter.

But he didn't remove the blades in his gauntlets. And he didn't remove his jet pack.

"Not even the Jedi can force me to visit a strange planet with no self-defense whatsoever," Boba muttered. "And when I see Hat Lo, I can get some new weapons. It's time I upgraded a few items, anyway."

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He made sure his helmet was in place. Then he did a last minute check of *Slave I*.

“Okay,” Boba said to himself. He stood in his ship’s doorway and looked out. His heart began to pound, not with fear but anticipation. *I’m on the Jedi’s home turf now! Got to be careful. Got to be calm. Got to be ready—*

*To find and defeat Mace Windu!*

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

As Boba strode across the open plaza, the strange Jedi turned to appraise the newcomer. Her eyes beneath her somber brown hood were alert and questioning.

“Who is this you have brought here?” she asked Tarkin. “I know that I approved your request to land, but you gave us so few details....”

The governor waited for Boba to join them, then turned to the older Jedi and bowed his head to her respectfully. He looked at Boba and gestured at the tall Jedi.

“This is Luminara Unduli,” Tarkin said by way of introduction. “I have worked with her before, in various negotiations with the Separatists.”

Luminara Unduli regarded Boba with interest. She had the dark eyes and smooth bronze skin and ornate facial tattoos of the desert-dwellers of Miral. She had their detached intelligence as well. Even inside his helmet, Boba could feel the intensity of her probing gaze.

“So, Governor Tarkin. This is the envoy Skywalker mentioned.” Her stare grew even more pronounced.

Boba’s hand began to twitch instinctively for his blaster, but he checked it in time. Instead he inclined his head to Luminara and said nothing.

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“Does the envoy have a name?” Luminara asked pointedly. “I note he does not have a face. Not one I can see, anyway.”

“The envoy has news for the Chancellor alone,” Tarkin said smoothly. He glanced aside, and Boba could swear he winked at him. “He wishes to remain anonymous. His mission is extremely perilous. His journey has been arduous. And he may have information that will help our cause. The Republic has guaranteed him safe passage here—that should be enough to satisfy the Jedi High Council.”

“And do you take responsibility for him?” Luminara asked coolly. “These are perilous times for all of us.”

“No doubt,” concluded Tarkin. Boba could see the governor’s eyes flash dangerously. “I have spoken for him. My word shall be enough.”

Luminara’s gaze flickered at Tarkin’s words; with anger or doubt, Boba could not be sure. Finally, she nodded. “Very well. I can see he is unarmed. I will trust the Chancellor’s judgment, Governor. You may show him to his chambers.”

She began to turn to leave. Then she stopped, adding, “The Chancellor has acknowledged your request that he meet with this envoy. He has agreed to do so tonight. Chancellor Palpatine must meet with Mace Windu in his chambers first. You may escort your *envoy* to his rooms now. Then I need to debrief you on the Xagobah situation, Governor.”

Tarkin bowed. Boba inclined his head very slightly as Luminara left. He was really glad now that they couldn’t see his face.

*Mace Windu!*

Boba would never get another chance like this. Not even the thought of Chancellor Palpatine’s wrath could curb Boba’s fierce joy at the thought of destroying his enemy.

*Gotta find Hat Lo first, though, he thought. Gotta get new weapons—and shake Tarkin!*

The governor seemed preoccupied with his own thoughts. “This way,” he said. He motioned Boba to follow him. “I’ll take



you to your quarters. Then I must take care of some Senate affairs.”

They walked in silence across the landing plaza. Ahead of them loomed the proud spires of the Jedi Temple. As they drew nearer, Boba had to fight the urge to draw a nonexistent blaster. He could see dark-robed figures moving around the base of the closest tower. A few of them glanced curiously at him.

“They better not give me any trouble,” Boba muttered under his breath.

“They won’t,” Tarkin said curtly.

They had reached one of the main entrances to the Temple. Tarkin slowed his steps. He looked at the young bounty hunter beside him.

“I’m taking an awful risk with you, Boba Fett,” he said in a low voice. “And I’m not even sure why. But I have an enormous amount of confidence in young Skywalker.”

Tarkin gestured for Boba to enter the Temple.

“I hope you prove worth it,” Tarkin said. “We are always looking for new allies.”

Boba watched as Governor Tarkin walked off into his own future. Then Boba turned, and silently entered the stronghold of the Jedi.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Inside the Jedi Temple, all was muted, but not utterly silent. Robed Jedi passed, their cloaks sweeping the floor. A small group of very young Jedi initiates went by, walking in a straight line. They turned to stare with open mouths at the tall, helmeted young man who strode past them.

“Who is that?” one of the children asked. The Jedi instructor leading them paused, staring at Boba curiously.

“I’m looking for the visitors’ quarters,” Boba said before she could question him. “Anakin Skywalker arranged for me to stay here.”

At mention of Skywalker’s name, the Jedi nodded.

“Of course,” she said. “That way—follow the corridor until it turns left. The door of your room will be open.”

“Thanks,” said Boba. The children continued to stare at him with such huge eyes that he was tempted to laugh.

But he didn’t. Instead he hurried down the corridor the Jedi had indicated. It was a wide passage, lit with the bright, soft light the Jedi favored for public spaces. In the distance he could see two formidable figures walking side by side, deep in discussion. As they drew near, Boba stiffened.

*It can’t be!* he thought. Every hair on his head prickled. Without thinking his hand grasped at his utility belt.

That was when Boba remembered that his weapons were gone.

And only a handsbreadth away was—  
Mace Windu!

Boba's mouth went dry. The last time he had seen Windu was in the Geonosian execution arena. There the Jedi Master had stood unflinching and grim above the corpse of Boba's father, Jango, whom he had slain.

*Father!* Boba thought, as the anguish of that moment came back to him.

As though he had spoken the words aloud, Boba saw Windu suddenly glance his way.

*Can't let him know it's me!* Boba thought desperately. *Not now. Not when I'm so close!*

Boba hadn't seen Mace Windu in many years. But he knew of the tall Jedi Master's incredible skill at fighting—and more. Windu was rumored to possess a voice and will so powerful that he seldom needed to use the Force on his enemies, let alone a lightsaber.

And that voice had fallen suddenly, ominously, silent as Boba passed in the hallway.

*Don't stare at him,* Boba thought. *Just keep going. Don't stop, don't—*

But he could feel Mace Windu's gaze boring into him. And he could see Windu halt, putting a hand on his companion's arm as he gazed after Boba.

"Who—?" Mace Windu began to ask in his deep tones.

"Master Windu! Master Windu!"

A child's high voice rang through the passage. The Jedi Master turned, his expression changing from suspicion to amusement as one of the tiny Jedi younglings ran toward him, the breathless instructor at her heels.

"Veda!" the instructor called in exasperation. "Get back here immediately!"

"But I want to ask him something!"

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Mace looked at the child. As he laughed, Boba hastened on down the passage. Still, as the hall began to turn toward the left, he couldn't resist glancing back.

Mace stood, listening patiently as the child prattled on. But as he listened he slowly turned his head, staring directly down the passage.

At Boba.

*He can't know it's me, Boba thought. And even if he does—*

For an instant Boba remained where he was. The Jedi could not see the hatred in his eyes.

But perhaps he could feel the hatred in Boba's soul.

"I'll see you again very soon, Mace Windu," Boba whispered before turning to continue on his way.

The room that had been made ready for him was spare but comfortable. He had worried that the Jedi were going to put a guard on watch, but clearly they were too occupied to spend effort on an informant whose information they did not know yet to be true. But this played to Boba's advantage. He wasted little time in his room. He shut the door and activated the room's communicator. Within seconds, Hat Lo's sweaty face once more stared out at him.

"Boba!" he said in forced joviality. "I didn't expect to hear again from you so soon!"

"No? Well, you're going to see me even sooner. I need to meet with you."

"Now?" Hat Lo sounded aggrieved.

"As I told you, my business is urgent. Jabba's business..."

Boba let his voice trail off threateningly.

Hat Lo blanched. "Of course, of course!" he said. "I'll send a speeder for you immediately! I will meet you within the hour at the Sign of the Tri-Forked Tongue. You will be my most honored guest," he added, his voice rising with anxiety. "As

befits one of Jabba's most trusted circle—besides myself, of course.”

“Of course,” said Boba. Behind his helmet he smiled unpleasantly. “The Sign of the Tri-Forked Tongue, in one hour. I’ll see you there.”

Hat Lo’s round face blipped from view. For a few minutes Boba sat alone in his room.

“Mace’s lightsaber assaults are legendary,” he said, brooding. “He’s taller than me, too, though not by much. I have my blades, but I’ll need a blaster. And a saberdart would be really good for backup....”

Boba nodded excitedly at the thought of the poisonous Kamino weapon. *That would really do the job! Not even a Jedi Master could withstand the venom of a saberdart! Now let’s just hope Hat Lo can put his grimy little hands on one for me.*

He hurried off to meet the Coruscant lowlife’s airspeeder.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The bright-red airspeeder was waiting near *Slave I* on the landing dock. With a pang, Boba immediately recognized the humanoid alien piloting it.

“Oh no!” he groaned. “Not Elan Sleazebaggano!”

“Elan’s the name,” the obnoxious young con man announced as Boba jumped into the seat beside him. His long antennae wriggled with pride. “Flying’s my game! Unless, of course, I could interest you in some Polordion smootdust?”

Elan whipped out a shimmering green parcel and waved it enticingly in Boba’s face. “One hundred percent pure, satisfaction guaranteed—”

Boba grabbed Elan’s shoulder. “I’m not interested in your cheap contraband, Sleazebaggano!” he said. “Take me to the Sign of the Tri-Forked Tongue—fast!”

Elan nodded eagerly. “Sure, sure!” The shimmering green packet disappeared. Elan punched at the control panels. The airspeeder swooped away from the docking platform.

“You look like a discerning bounty hunter,” Elan went on, almost without drawing a breath. “Maybe you’re more interested in a pair of tortapo-shell shades! One-hundred-percent natural, guaranteed to block out dangerous infradig rays—”

“Fast, and silent!” ordered Boba. He tightened his grip on Elan’s shoulder.

“Sure, sure!” gulped Elan. His long fleshy antennae twitched nervously. “I live to please. But maybe you’d consider—”

Boba groaned. Elan was relentless!

*Where’s my blaster when I need it?*

“This better be a short trip,” Boba said menacingly. “Otherwise...”

“Sure, sure!”

The airspeeder raced away from the Jedi Temple. Around them the skyscraper caverns of Coruscant shone and glittered. This was where the galaxy’s most wealthy residents lived. Senators, ambassadors, diplomats, guild leaders, merchants—all in those glimmering towers. That was who rode in those sleek speeder limos. That was who ate in those fantastically expensive restaurant terraces, and slept in bedrooms bigger than a Caridan training arena.

Boba tried not to look impressed by it all.

But as they approached the gigantic building that housed the Galactic Senate, he couldn’t help it. His eyes widened slightly, and he edged closer to the side of the airspeeder to get a better look.

“So that’s it,” he murmured. The domed building was immense—it looked as though it could be half the size of the moon where he’d met Anakin. “That’s where Chancellor Palpatine holds court. And tomorrow...”

He couldn’t voice the rest of his thought out loud. Tomorrow, Mace Windu would be dead. Boba would be long gone from here. Supreme Chancellor Palpatine would be addressing the Senate in an urgent emergency meeting to share with them the secret that Boba had shared with him—that Dooku and Tyranus were the same person.

One who wanted the Republic to fall.

“The Senate Building, that’s right,” said Elan. He barely gave the huge domed edifice a second look. “That’s where all the

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galaxy's most important official business takes place. But where we're going—"

The airspeeder gave a sudden lurch. Without warning it dived straight down between kilometer-high buildings, as though it was plunging into a shining abyss.

"Watch it!" shouted Boba as another speeder streaked right toward them. He grabbed the controls from Elan. "We're going to crash right into—"

At the last possible moment, Boba got their speeder to veer sharply to one side. He had a glimpse of the angry, white-faced pilot of the other speeder glaring at Elan's bright-red one.

Then Elan calmly removed Boba's hands from the controls.

"Where we're going," Elan went on as though nothing had happened, "is where the galaxy's most important unofficial business takes place. Coruscant underground!"

"You're talking about the gangland underworld," Boba said. He watched as they sped down, down toward the garishly lit lower levels of Galactic City. "Hat Lo's territory."

"And mine!" Elan said in a wounded tone. "I happen to be the provider of the very finest death sticks in the galaxy, very reasonably priced, very—"

"Stop!" shouted Boba. "Get me to the Tri-Forked Tongue. NOW!"

The rest of their trip passed in near silence. Now and then Elan sighed noisily. And his antennae never stopped wriggling, as though they were trying to sell Boba on some highly illegal Nklonian Lava Extract, one hundred percent pure.

But at last the red airspeeder began to slow. Ahead of them beckoned a brilliant entryway, lit by gaudy purple and green zeon light-tubes. The VR image of a slithering Monga serpent repeatedly rose and seemed to strike, its mouth opening to display three long furling orange tongues.

"The Sign of the Tri-Forked Tongue," Elan announced. He sounded bored. "I don't know why you're bothering with this place. No one goes here anymore."



“Well, I do,” snapped Boba.

He extricated himself from the airspeeder. In the shadows, a slaverling corridor ghouel crouched, looking for unwary visitors to prey on. A group of sinister-looking, emaciated mutants stood near the club’s entrance, playing pillem-dice. It seemed like an unpromising place to obtain illegal weapons.

But Boba had no time to look for a better one. He wanted Mace Windu dead—tonight.

“My card,” said Elan. He handed Boba a shining strip of crimson emblazoned with the words *ELAN SLEAZEBAGGANO: WHEN ONLY THE BEST AND SLIMIEST WILL DO!* “In the event that Hat Lo is unable to provide you with what you need, please don’t hesitate to call me.”

“Unlikely,” retorted Boba.

But he took the card.

The airspeeder roared off, careering wildly between alarmed passersby. Boba turned and looked at the seedy club before him.

*Hat Lo better be there!* he thought grimly. *I can’t afford to waste any more time.*

He entered the Sign of the Tri-Forked Tongue. Inside was even dimmer and grimmer than the colorful VR sign had promised. Underfoot, something sticky and unpleasant clung to Boba’s boots.

“Ugh!” he said, kicking at a small pulsating object—a young granite slug. The slug exploded with a blubbering sound. Bits of goo flecked the walls.

Boba grimaced. “Great. This isn’t a very good start.”

A few meters farther on, a burly figure blocked a doorway, a six-limbed alien with protruding eyes. Beside it stood a slender Twi’lek, yawning.

“I’m here to see Hat Lo,” Boba announced gruffly. The tan-and-brown-striped Twi’lek blinked, then quietly slipped away. The alien bouncer glanced at a list in one of its hands and waved Boba in.

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The Sign of the Tri-Forked Tongue was dim and smoky. It was filled with small tables where Coruscant's riffraff sat, gambling and arranging illegal deals, angrily settling old scores and making new ones.

"There he is," Boba muttered.

He spotted Hat Lo at a table in the corner. The would-be crime boss was surrounded by five Codru-Ji bodyguards. Two of them were adults, in their four-armed, humanoid mode. The remaining three were juveniles, in the Codru-Ji's distinctive four-legged wyrwulf stage.

None of them appeared to be very happy to see Boba approaching their boss's table.

"Hat Lo," Boba said. He glanced disdainfully at the bodyguards. "I need to talk to you—alone."

The crook's round face shone with sweat. He maneuvered awkwardly in his body shielding.

"Make room for Boba Fett," he ordered, gesturing impatiently for the bodyguards to move. "Boba, please—sit."

Boba stood his ground. "Not until they leave."

His hand moved threateningly toward where his blaster should be. He was unarmed, but in the darkness, it would be difficult for anyone to know that.

Hat Lo regarded the bounty hunter uneasily. Finally he commanded his bodyguards, "Go! Wait for me by the door!"

The pack of Codru-Ji stood. They strode across the room, the young wyrwulfs casting hungry looks back at Boba.

"Sit, sit," repeated Hat Lo. As if by magic, the slender Twi'lek appeared at his shoulder. She carried two beakers of fizzing liquid. Hat Lo took one. The Twi'lek offered the other to Boba.

"Drink with me!" exclaimed Hat Lo. He raised his beaker and waited for Boba to do the same. "To friendship!"

"No thanks," said Boba. He dumped the beaker's contents onto the floor. An acrid smell rose from the ground, followed by a puff of greenish flame and a sizzling noise. "Dozoisian Snark Venom. Deadly if it passes your lips. Nice try, Hat Lo."

Hat Lo feigned surprise.

"I'm shocked, shocked," he said. "It's poisonous?"

He shoved his still-full beaker back at the Twi'lek, glaring at her as she beat a hasty retreat. Then he turned back to Boba, shrugging as if to say, *You can't blame a crook for trying!*

"Well then," the two-bit gangster continued. "Now that we've gotten the preliminaries out of the way, what can I do for you?"

"I need to upgrade my armaments," said Boba. He sat opposite Hat Lo, keeping a careful eye out for the bodyguards.

"Of course. And for some reason you can't go through legal channels." Hat Lo leered. "Well, you've come to the right person! May I ask what brings you to Coruscant?"

Boba hesitated. He was reluctant to share the truth with Hat Lo. But his minions could probably find out any information Hat Lo needed to know.

And Boba didn't want any unnecessary attention being drawn to him in the next few hours....

If he told Hat Lo himself, Boba could control the situation. And Boba liked being in control.

"I have business with Supreme Chancellor Palpatine," he said.

Boba was rewarded by Hat Lo's look of stunned dismay. "Palpatine? But that's—well, that's extremely interesting." Hat Lo's beady little eyes narrowed. "And you're looking for weapons? Why? Not even Jabba the Hutt can be thinking of assassinating the Supreme Chancellor!"

Boba shook his head. "Jabba's plans are no business of yours, Hat Lo. Not unless you want to be implicated in them..."

He let the words hang in the air as a threat. Hat Lo raised his hands defensively. "No, no! Such important matters are far too big for a mere hardworking businessman like myself! I ask only because one hears rumors. Unpleasant rumors. Great changes are afoot, Boba Fett. You should be careful what side you're on, when the changes come."

## Elizabeth Hand

"I'm on no one's side," said Boba sharply. "I trust no one but myself. And I certainly don't trust you, Hat Lo! So don't try to cheat me, or sell me sub-standard weapons."

"The thought never crossed my mind," replied Hat Lo. Still, he looked disappointed. "Now, what exactly do you need?"

Boba rolled off his requests. "A Westar blaster, some missiles, and pulse grenades, to start with."

Hat Lo shook his head. "I have none of those at the moment. If I'd known in advance, perhaps. But at such short notice? No. You understand, my business is supply-driven. Here on Coruscant, we try to settle things more, shall I say, quietly."

"More underhandedly, you mean?" sneered Boba.

"I mean we try not to draw unwanted attention to ourselves by frivolous use of weapons. Not that your weapons could ever be deemed frivolous," Hat Lo added quickly. "Now, what I do have at the moment is a flechette pistol—very nice, never been used, fully loaded. Also some cryo-ban grenades, if you'd like."

Boba looked impressed. "A flechette? Those are hard to come by!"

"I know," Hat Lo said with pride. "Are you familiar with their use?"

Boba snorted. A good bounty hunter made use of whatever weapons came his way—and Boba wasn't just a good bounty hunter. He was the best!

"Of course I know how to use it!" The pistol released canisters holding hundreds of tiny, razor-edged blades—flechettes. "I'll take them all, and whatever else you have."

A short while later the deal was done. The Twi'lek materialized again, this time accompanied by a shifty-looking Bothan carrying the weapons. Boba examined them all carefully, then nodded.

"These will do."

Hat Lo dismissed his lackeys. Boba began arming himself, being careful to keep the weapons concealed on his body armor. After a few minutes, Hat Lo discreetly cleared his throat.

“Ahem. A small matter, of course—but how do you intend to pay for these?”

Behind his helmet, Boba’s eyes glittered dangerously. He looked around at the interior of the seedy club.

“I don’t recall seeing the Sign of the Tri-Forked Tongue listed among Jabba’s holdings here on Coruscant,” he said. “I wonder what Jabba would say if he knew you owned it, and were skimming off the profits, rather than giving them to him?”

Hat Lo began to splutter. “That’s—that’s not true! This is a mere sideline for me! Something for my old age—”

Boba made as though to leave.

“Wait!” cried Hat Lo. Boba stared at him, then slowly sat back down. “Of course, I had no intention of charging you for these weapons! Consider them a gift, to you—and to Jabba.”

Boba nodded. “Very well.”

“And please, tell Jabba where you got them! And assure him of my devotion, and my undying loyalty!”

“Undying sleaziness is more like it,” said Boba.

He got to his feet. This time he really was ready to go. He saw Hat Lo’s many-armed bodyguards watching him from across the room. But not even a bunch of angry Codru-Ji would dare mess with Boba Fett, now that he was fully armed.

Which reminded him of something. He turned back to Hat Lo.

“One last thing,” Boba said. “Do you know where I could get my hands on a saberdart?”

“A saberdart?” Hat Lo’s eyes narrowed. He pursed his lips, then shook his head. “They’re outlawed here on Coruscant these days. Everyone’s too worried about attacks on the Senators.”

“Right.” Boba nodded and turned away. “I’ll give Jabba a decent report, Hat Lo—unless you give me reason to do otherwise.”

The petty crime boss watched him go. “A pleasure doing business with you, Boba Fett,” he croaked, then laughed hoarsely. “I’m sure our paths will cross again!”

**Elizabeth Hand**

“Maybe,” said Boba under his breath.

He swaggered past the Codru-Ji, back out onto the streets of Coruscant’s underworld.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Boba hadn't thought about how he was going to get back up to the Jedi Temple to track down Mace Windu.

But as soon as he walked out of the Sign of the Tri-Forked Tongue, a familiar sight greeted him.

A shining red airspeeder hovered near the club's entrance.

"Yo! Wassup!" Elan Sleazebaggano gestured for Boba to hop in beside him. "Come on, I'll take you back!"

Dismayed, Boba looked around. He saw the corridor ghouls nosing at what looked unpleasantly like a body. He saw two Mantellian savrips fighting over what looked like another body. He saw a group of space pirates exchanging greetings near a darkened doorway.

What he didn't see was another vehicle of any kind.

"Come on!" urged Elan. "I'll get you there faster than anyone can!"

"All right," Boba said, resigned. He climbed into the airspeeder, glowering at Elan. "But if you try to sell me something, Sleazebaggano, you're dead!"

"Sell you something?" Elan yanked at the controls. With a squeal, the airspeeder shot up through the high-rise canyons of Coruscant. "I wouldn't dream of selling you something!"

## Elizabeth Hand

Especially not something highly illegal and fatally toxic, like a saberdart.”

“A saberdart?” Boba held tight to his seat, as the airspeeder narrowly avoided slamming into a building. “You have a saberdart?”

“I never said that,” Elan replied. The airspeeder shot past another speeder full of willowy young Dathomir witches. Elan waved at them. “Girls! Hellooooo!”

The witches stared back in ill-disguised disgust. The red airspeeder rocketed upward, as Elan continued.

“I never said that, because to possess a saberdart is a criminal offense. And I, of course, am a respected member of Coruscant’s business community. But yes, I do have one.”

Elan took one hand from the controls. The airspeeder wobbled dangerously as he seemed to pluck something from thin air. The object glittered, as Elan turned and handed it to Boba.

“One saberdart, no waiting. No payment, either—consider it a gift, a token of my great admiration for your bounty-hunting skills. Oh, you might mention it to Jabba, if you feel inclined,” said Elan. “Put in a good word for me. A word to the wise, as they say.”

Boba took the saberdart. He looked at it suspiciously, but it seemed to be genuine.

“How did you—” he began, but Elan cut him off.

“I’d tell you,” he said, “but then you’d have to kill me. Trust me, it’s real.”

In the near distance, the Jedi Temple’s towers loomed. The airspeeder began to slow. Quickly Boba shoved the dart onto his utility belt.

The speeder came to a stop on the docking platform. Boba climbed out.

“Thanks,” he said grudgingly.

“Anytime!” said Elan. He looked up at Boba and wiggled his antennae. “Just remember—tell your friends! Tell your enemies! I



stand behind all my products! One-hundred-percent pure, satisfaction guaranteed!”

With a farewell wave of his antennae, Elan powered up his vehicle. The bright-red airspeeder shot into reverse. Then it rocketed off into the haze.

Boba watched it go. Then he turned and hurried toward the Temple entrance.

*Got to find Mace Windu*, he thought with iron determination. His hands traced over his flechette pistol and his concealed daggers. Last of all he checked that the saberdart was where it could be easily deployed. *Got to finish something that Mace Windu started, a long time ago.*

*And then—then it will be time to start on a new life.*

Because once he had avenged his father’s death, Boba knew he would be ready to take Jango’s place in the world. Not as a boy, but as a man.

He saw *Slave I* waiting in its docking bay.

“I’ll be back soon,” he said, smiling slightly at sight of his ship. As he passed, he reached to touch the wing that Anakin Skywalker had fixed. “When I return, the sky’s the limit.”

Then, silent and unseen, Boba Fett entered the Jedi Temple.

The final hunt for Mace Windu had begun.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

It was early evening now. Most of the Jedi were at meals, or tending to private weapons practice, or research in the Archives library. Boba made his way quickly and stealthily through the Temple's winding passages.

Word must have passed among the Jedi that Boba was here on official business and was not to be detained. The few Jedi he passed scarcely gave him a look.

"Typical Jedi arrogance," Boba murmured.

He felt almost disappointed that no one confronted him. He'd like to take out a few Jedi on their own turf!

Still, Boba knew he had no time to waste on anyone but Mace Windu.

*I'll have plenty of other chances to take out Jedi scum,* he thought. *First things first!*

It didn't take him long to figure out where the members of the Jedi Council had their quarters. It took him even less time to find an alcove housing a worn door. He opened the door carefully and peeked inside.

"A service corridor!" said Boba under his breath. "Just what I needed!"

He checked to make sure no one saw him, and slipped inside. The passage was completely empty and smelled of dust. A few

dead Coruscant botflies were scattered on the floor, but nothing else. Boba checked the walls, then took a few scans using one of his handheld nav aids.

“Yes!” gloated Boba.

The tiny computer showed a grid of red and green lines: a map of the Council Members level. The secondary passage he stood inside was a disused corridor that ran parallel to the central hallway.

*If I follow this passage, it will lead me straight to Mace Windu’s chambers. I just have to get there before he leaves for his meeting with Palpatine!*

Boba shoved the nav aid back into his utility belt. Then he stealthily began to run, his feet making no sound in the narrow passage. In a few minutes he had reached the next level, then the next.

Finally he saw another door in the shadows. His footsteps slowed.

“Got to be careful here,” he whispered.

This door led to the corridor that went directly to Mace Windu’s chambers.

But Boba certainly didn’t want to meet Windu where others might see them and come to the Jedi’s aid. Very slowly he cracked the door open and peered out.

The corridor was empty. Ruby-colored light slanted down from viewscreens high overhead. Outside, it was sunset on Coruscant.

Boba looked around carefully. Then he quickly slipped into the central passage. He ran without a sound to where the hallway ended. There, a single black doorway loomed.

The door to Mace Windu’s chambers. The door to Mace Windu’s death!

Boba slid his hand over the flechette pistol. He looked over his shoulder to see if anyone had spotted him.

No one was there.

## Elizabeth Hand

Slowly Boba drew the pistol. He cocked its safety, then crept toward the door. Moments from now, he would confront his enemy.

Mace would be deep in thought, preparing himself for his meeting with the Supreme Chancellor. He would be stunned to see Boba burst into his room. He would have no chance to defend himself. Not even a lightsaber could deflect hundreds of flechettes!

And not even a Jedi could withstand the deadly toxins released by a saberdart.

Boba's hand was on the door. His heart pounded as he took a deep breath.

He thought of his father, Jango, lying decapitated in the arena. He thought of Mace Windu lying dead. He recalled Jango's face breaking into a rare smile as he read to his son in their home on Geonosis.

"This is for you, Father," whispered Boba. He raised the flechette pistol.

Then, with all his strength he pushed the door open. Weapon ready to fire, Boba Fett lunged inside the Jedi's chamber, and found himself face-to-face with—

Nothing.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

*It can't be!*

Boba looked around in frustrated rage. The chamber was empty. He swiveled, his pistol ready to fire, and looked around.

There was no one. Even without checking the rest of the room, Boba's hyperalert senses registered the truth.

The Jedi Master was gone.

Boba quickly sheathed his weapon. He strode to a round, low cushion of the type favored by high-ranking Jedi, stooped, and laid a hand upon it.

It was still warm. Windu must have left just minutes before.

Boba fought a surge of fury. He'd been so close!

But he wasn't going to let Mace get away so easily. Boba knew where he was bound—to his private meeting with Palpatine in the Senate Building. Boba had no idea where in that vast building he might track down Windu.

But Boba had no doubt that he would succeed in finding him. He turned and started for the door, then stopped.

*Too dangerous to go back out there now. Someone might see me and alert Windu....*

He drew the door closed. He began a quick search of the chamber, looking for something that might be useful.

## Elizabeth Hand

A minute later he found it—a small monitor tucked into the wall. Boba activated it, then brought up the most recently viewed screen.

“Got it!” he crowed.

The screen showed an itinerary, generated by the Supreme Chancellor’s office. There was a reminder of the time for Mace Windu’s private meeting, just fifteen minutes from now. There was a memo regarding the meeting’s topic.

EXTREMELY URGENT was all that Boba bothered to read before scrolling down.

And there was a map of the Senate Building, showing the exact location of Palpatine’s antechamber, where the meeting would be held!

“Perfect,” said Boba. He memorized the data and shut the monitor off. Then he hurried across the room. One wall was covered by a long curtain. Boba grabbed the curtain and yanked it back.

Crimson sunset light flooded the chamber. A floor-to-ceiling shuttered window looked down onto the gleaming towers and chasms of Galactic City.

“Nice view,” said Boba. “Hate to ruin it, but—”

His booted foot smashed through the transparent material. Cool air flowed inside, along with the sounds of the night city—airspeeders, distant voices. Boba stepped to the very edge of the sill. He looked down, adjusting his helmet for night vision.

“There it is,” he said.

In the distance, he could see the immense dome of the Senate Building shining in the twilight. Boba tensed. Wind rushed past him through the shattered window. Somewhere in the Jedi Temple, someone would be looking for the mysterious envoy in Mandalorian armor.

No one could find him here.

Boba stared at the vast expanse of Galactic City, its lowest depths more than a kilometer below him.

He took a step forward.

He jumped.

For a second he was in free fall. Then his jet pack roared to life. Boba angled the controls so that he flew swiftly from the Jedi Temple. Seconds later it was safely behind him, hidden by other towering skyscrapers.

He flew toward the Senate. If anyone had wanted to, they could have looked up and seen him—a tall figure in dark-green body armor, his head hidden by a Mandalorian battle helmet.

But no one knew to look for Boba Fett. He flew swiftly and unseen through the great city's high rise canyons, past shining buildings and domes, past bright clubs teeming with nightlife. He saw airspeeders and swoop bikes, air limos, taxis, freighters. Once he even thought he glimpsed Elan's bright-red speeder, darting down to the lowest levels of the city.

But Boba had no time for any of that now. He had only one thought in mind: Find Mace and destroy him. Even meeting with Palpatine paled beside that.

Nothing was going to keep Boba Fett from his destination.

Nothing was going to keep him from his destiny.

The map he'd seen in Windu's room had shown that the Supreme Cancellor's official chambers were on the northeast side of the dome. As Boba drew nearer, he could see lights shining from the dome's upper windows. Inside, figures moved.

The Senators. Palpatine wouldn't be with them, though. He'd be preparing for his meeting with Mace Windu—and then his meeting with Boba Fett.

"Palpatine's expecting me, but not this soon," Boba muttered as his jet pack brought him closer to the building. "And I doubt he's expecting me to land on his windowsill!"

But Boba had no desire to confront Palpatine's security guards. And Boba especially didn't want Mace Windu to have the advantage of seeing him first. He powered down his jet pack, aiming for a wide ledge two levels above Palpatine's chambers.

In a moment he landed smoothly on the ledge. A quick look around reassured him that he'd gone undetected.

## Elizabeth Hand

“Made it!” he exclaimed.

He grabbed the rappelling line on his utility belt and stooped. He fastened the hook to the ledge, yanking at it to test that it would hold. Then he slowly let himself down, his gloved hands tight around the rope.

This was the risky part. If someone happened to pass by inside, Boba would be seen.

And that wouldn’t be good. At best, he’d be detained and questioned before being released to Palpatine.

At worst—

*That’s not gonna happen!*

Boba pushed the thought away.

Down, down, down. He braced himself against the dome’s wall. The dome was curved and smooth. Sometimes his boots slid off, despite their magnatonic soles.

*Uh-oh!*

In his hands, the rope suddenly grew slack. Boba looked up and saw the hook wobbling slightly.

*Gotta hurry!*

He was level with Palpatine’s chamber now. There was no one there—no one he could see, anyway.

It was now or never!

He kicked out, swinging back, then forward. His boots grazed the ledge. He kicked again, propelling himself farther back. Then he began to swoop in toward the ledge again.

*Oh no!*

A twist of rope looped around his hands. Boba looked up quickly.

Two levels above him, the grappling hook tore away. The rope began to fall.

But Boba’s feet had already found purchase on the ledge outside Palpatine’s chamber. For an instant he swayed, perilously close to plunging off.

Then he caught his balance.

*That was close!*



Boba straightened. In front of him, black transparisteel showed his reflection. He replaced the rappelling line and withdrew a small laser blade. Its ruby tip glowed as he began to cut a hole in the window, just big enough for his hand to pass through. When the hole was completed, he carefully removed the transparisteel. He slid his hand inside, expertly finding the alarm system, then disabling it. His hand slipped down and pulled the latch.

The window swung open.

He was in!

Now to find Mace...

The room was small and dim. It smelled faintly of expensive spices. Thick carpet was underfoot, and small lights cast a soft glow over a door and sculptures at one end.

*That's the antechamber,* he thought. *That's where Mace is.*

Silently he stepped to the door. He put his hand on the latch. It was unlocked. He listened, adjusting his helmet's aural enhancers so he could hear the faintest sound from the other side.

And yes, he could hear breathing. The breathing was slow, measured, calm...

Boba drew his flechette pistol. He took a deep breath then shoved the door open.

And there he was. Boba's greatest enemy—

Mace Windu.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The tall Jedi stood pensively at the far end of the room. His hands were in his robes. His head was down. As Boba entered he looked up, eyes widening slightly.

“Who—?”

Boba stared at him without remorse.

“You killed my father,” he said.

Boba’s heart was racing. But his voice was cold and utterly calm.

And his pistol was aimed directly at Mace’s chest.

“I’ve waited a long time for this, Jedi Windu—but I’m not waiting anymore!”

Boba fired. The flechette’s missile tore through the air. A nanosecond later it burst open. Hundreds of deadly projectiles spun out.

Faster than thought, Mace Windu leaped aside. The missiles exploded against the wall.

“Who are you?” Mace Windu shouted.

Boba fired again. Another starburst of flechettes exploded through the room.

Again, the Jedi was too fast.

“On Geonosis, you murdered a warrior named Jango Fett,” Boba said.

*FFFFAAMM!* He fired again!

“Jango Fett was my father.”

“Your father?” Mace raced from the barrage of flechettes. “He had no son! Only clones—”

“He had me!” Boba lunged at Mace. The Jedi fell back, overwhelmed by the young man’s rage and power. “And now I’ll have you!”

*KRACK!*

A flechette smashed against Mace’s shoulder. The Jedi reeled backward. His hand reached for his lightsaber. But before he could touch it Boba struck again, this time the other shoulder. And again!

*KRACK! KRACK!*

With each alternate blow the Jedi fell back. In a moment, Boba would have him pinioned against the wall. And then—he’d go for the kill!

“I had no choice!” Mace’s voice was deep, unafraid. Without warning he leaped, springing past Boba as he drew his lightsaber. “Just as you’re giving me no choice now!”

The lightsaber glowed deep violet. Its hum filled the room, and Mace Windu swung—and struck!

*FAM!*

Boba staggered back. The lightsaber had skimmed his armor. He recovered immediately, darting off. Mace followed, his robes billowing behind him.

*FAM!*

The lightsaber struck again!

But this time Boba was ready. Or so he thought. Mace’s violet blur sliced the flechette pistol cleanly out of his hand. Blinding indigo light flared as Mace Windu drew back, arm raised for another blow.

Before he could strike, Boba drew his dagger with his free hand and charged.

The dagger ripped through Mace’s robes. The Jedi twisted, avoiding the blade.

## Elizabeth Hand

But Boba's fist followed, smashing into the Jedi's ribs.

"Ah—!"

Mace staggered to one side. Before he could dodge, Boba was on him!

*BAM!*

Boba lunged the dagger at Mace's head—but the Jedi was too fast! He dropped and rolled, jumping to his feet. The lightsaber rose and fell—

And struck.

"Agh!" Boba cried out as the glowing blade smashed against his shoulder. Pain arced through him. Blood seeped from Grievous's wound.

"Surrender!" commanded Mace Windu. "Surrender, and I promise you'll receive fair treatment!"

"Surrender?" Boba hesitated, feigning doubt. Unseen he shoved the dagger into his belt, then reached for a cryo-ban grenade.

"You have my word," Mace continued.

"And you have my hatred!" Boba screamed.

He fired the grenade!

Mace leaped, seeming to fly above Boba's head.

*BRRRAANG!*

Boba flung himself away from the freezing blast. Waves of numbing cold rushed past him as the cryo-blast absorbed heat. The cold could not penetrate Boba's body armor....

But Mace Windu had no body armor. The Jedi stumbled, nearly falling as the frigid waves sapped him of energy. Boba picked up his flechette pistol. He towered above the fallen Jedi.

He fired.

*FAM!*

Blinding pain lanced Boba's arm as Mace Windu's lightsaber struck.

"No!" Boba cried.

In agony, Boba fell. He rolled, trying to get to his feet.

*FAM!*

The lightsaber crashed against his head. Not even his helmet could absorb the blow. Boba shouted with pain and fury, striking blindly at the figure above him.

"I don't want to kill you," said Mace Windu grimly. "Surrender, or die."

"Never."

He swung his dagger. The Jedi's weapon knocked the dagger blade aside.

"You leave me no choice!" Mace cried.

Boba stumbled to his feet. Blood streamed from his wounds. The dagger lay useless and out of reach. And his blasters were on *Slave I*.

But he still had the saberdart. He slid his hand toward his utility belt. His fingers slipped into the familiar configuration of his palm shooter. The poisonous dart was loaded into it.

He had only one shot.

*I won't miss this time.*

He raised his hand. Mace Windu was just meters away. Boba stared at the Jedi, summoning all his strength. All his hatred.

His thumb pressed the trigger.

The dart sang from the palm shooter like an enraged hornet. It spun, glittering, through the air, straight for Mace Windu's throat.

*I got him!* Boba's mind sang in triumph.

Mace Windu flinched. His hand shot into the air. Between his fingers the saberdart shivered like a trapped insect.

"No!" groaned Boba.

Mace Windu flung the deadly dart into the shadows. He stepped toward Boba, his lightsaber poised to strike.

Boba Fett was cornered.

"This is my final offer of surrender," said the Jedi Master.

"No," said Boba in a low voice.

He would never surrender.

The Jedi took another step toward him. Boba thought of his friends back on Tatooine.

## Elizabeth Hand

*Good-bye, Ygabba. Good-bye, Gab'borah. I'll miss you.*

He thought of his father, fighting until the very last. Boba lifted his head and stared fearlessly at Mace Windu.

"There are worse things than death," the bounty hunter said, raising his flechette pistol.

"There are," the Jedi replied in his powerful voice. "You are brave indeed, stranger. I would have spared your life. But now you leave me no choice—"

His raised his arms. The glowing light blade tore through the air.

"STOP!"

A deafening shout of command filled the room. Heavy footsteps echoed as uniformed guards raced in. The Chancellor's Red Guards surrounded Mace Windu and Boba.

More footsteps sounded. Another figure entered the room, clad in the luxurious robes denoting his high rank.

"Who dares disrupt this place?" he demanded.

It was Supreme Chancellor Palpatine.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Your Eminence,” said Mace Windu. He deactivated his lightsaber and took a respectful step back. “I arrived a few minutes early for our meeting, and found this intruder in your antechamber.”

He gestured at Boba. Palpatine turned. He stared at the bounty hunter. The Supreme Chancellor nodded at Boba, almost imperceptibly.

“This man is not a stranger to me,” said Palpatine. “I was expecting him.”

“Expecting him!” Windu exclaimed. “But—”

Palpatine turned to calmly face the Jedi. No longer was Palpatine the soft-spoken, thoughtful figure who had first come to prominence in the Senate. Now the Chancellor radiated power—and arrogance.

“Do you *dare* question me?” he asked. “This bounty hunter has important *information*—information vital to the Republic! And will your bickering interfere with him bringing it to us?”

For a moment the Jedi said nothing. Then he nodded.

“I was unaware of your meeting. My sole concern was for your safety and the safety of the Republic.”

## Elizabeth Hand

Palpatine waved a hand toward the Red Guards. "As you can see, I am not unprotected. I am, as always, grateful for your support. But now, Master Windu, you may leave."

Palpatine inclined his head toward the door. Boba blinked. He swiftly replaced his weapons, and waited.

Mace Windu bowed slightly. But his eyes were on Boba. "Yes, your Eminence. The Jedi Council will question this bounty hunter after his meeting with you—"

"Perhaps."

Mace Windu walked to the door. At the last moment he paused and looked back at Boba. A long, hard look. Then the door closed behind him. Boba was alone with Supreme Chancellor Palpatine.

"I seem to be having a problem with people arriving early for their meetings," the Chancellor said smoothly.

He looked at Boba and smiled, but there was no warmth in his eyes.

Boba nodded. "I regret the inconvenience," he said.

He took a step forward, wincing at the pain. The Chancellor gestured at Boba's helmet.

"You may remove that," he said in his calmly ominous voice. "I know who you are—Boba Fett."

Boba sucked his breath in sharply. Then he did as the Chancellor had commanded, and held the helmet at his side.

"I know you are the Hutt clan's foremost bounty hunter," Palpatine went on. "I also know that you yourself are being hunted—by Count Dooku. And by Durge."

"I don't deny it," Boba replied.

"You say you have news for me. Information." Palpatine's eyes glittered. His hands smoothed the folds of his rich, long robes. "I am waiting."

Boba glanced at the Red Guards, and Palpatine motioned for Boba to follow him into his office. Once they were alone, Boba spoke.



“You are at war against the Separatists,” said Boba. “Count Dooku leads the Separatist cause. He is your most dangerous enemy and has vast droid armies. You have gathered a powerful force of clones. These clones were created by someone named Tyranus. Tyranus is your ally—or so you think.

“But I know the truth, Chancellor.”

Boba stopped.

The time had come for him to reveal what he knew. The secret had given him strength and purpose for years. He would reveal it now, to the Supreme Chancellor.

By aligning himself with Palpatine, Boba would gain more strength. He would be well paid for his information. Then he could leave and return to Tatooine in triumph, even though Wat Tambor had eluded him.

“I am waiting,” said Palpatine in a low voice.

“I learned of this when I was a prisoner of the Count on Raxus Prime. I was a boy then. He thought he had no need to fear me. But he was wrong.”

Boba took a breath. Then he said, “Count Dooku and Tyranus are the same person. Your greatest enemy created your armies. It is a trap.”

Palpatine lifted his head. His greedy, deepset eyes gleamed with avarice and the joy of knowledge. The joy of power.

The joy of triumph.

“I know,” he said.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Boba hesitated. “You...already know?”

Palpatine nodded. His hands slipped inside the folds of his robes.

“There is nothing I do not know,” he said. “Nothing that is worth knowing, anyway.”

“But—but why—”

Palpatine’s hand shot out, ordering silence. “That information is not yours to command, Boba Fett. It is mine alone.”

Palpatine looked closely at Boba, then continued. “I have heard much of your prowess as a tracker and bounty hunter. I know how your father died. I know who killed him—and why. When you arrived here I knew you would hunt down that Jedi Master.”

Boba stood, stunned.

“I have already arranged for your ship to be brought here from the Jedi Temple,” said Palpatine. “You will be escorted to it in a few moments. You will leave Coruscant immediately. And you will say nothing of this meeting to anyone—ever.”

Palpatine withdrew his hand from his robe. He held it out to Boba. A shining credit cube glittered in his palm.

“This should be ample compensation for you, bounty hunter. I believe we have an agreement and I believe we share a common enemy.”

Palpatine’s mouth curved in a small, sinister smile. Boba looked at him, then at the credit cube. He took the cube, then nodded.

“I will never say a word,” Boba replied.

“You had better not,” said Palpatine calmly. From the hallway echoed the sound of the Red Guards.

Boba pulled his helmet back over his head. He grimaced, but he could live with the pain. He could live with returning to Tatooine.

He could live with a lot of things, with the fortune Palpatine had given him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

*Slave I* shot into the velvety sky above Coruscant. Far, far below, the spectral lights of Galactic City shimmered and glowed, then began to grow fainter and fainter as Boba's ship hurtled off. In a few moments, Coruscant was only a glittering speck in all the galaxy.

And soon, even Coruscant had disappeared.

Behind the controls, Boba Fett sat pensively. He'd already arranged for Palpatine's credits to be stashed in an account on Aargau. That way, Boba could access them whenever he needed them. And no one else could—not even Jabba.

The Huttese gangster might question Boba returning without Wat Tambor. But as the battle between the Republic and the Separatists continued to rage, Boba suspected that Jabba would find other things to occupy his greedy little mind.

Besides, Boba was no longer intimidated by the thought of Jabba the Hutt. Boba had enough credits to last him the rest of his life. He could pick and choose his bounties, selecting only the ones that challenged him.

And there would be plenty of those! He'd already heard rumors of a kidnapping on Rodia. But first he might take a little time off and amuse himself. The All-Human Free-For-All on

Jubilar would be held soon. He might go to that. He could use a break....

The past was behind Boba now. His father was long buried. Boba had not killed Mace Windu, but he suspected that great troubles awaited him—and all Jedi. And the love and respect Jango had felt for his son would not die. And Boba's love for his father would not change, either.

Mace Windu had been a powerful opponent. And a worthy one. But there would be many more. Boba Fett knew that. He leaned forward, staring out at the vastness of space.

It was a big place, the galaxy. Endless, dangerous, exciting. A million adventures waited out there, for anyone bold enough to take them.

Boba's course was set. He had a ship full of weapons, and *Slave I* was the best ship in the galaxy.

Boba smiled. The future was his.

And he was on his way to seize it.



## About the Author

**Terry Bisson** is an American science fiction and fantasy author, born on February 12, 1942, in Owensboro, Kentucky. His many novels include *Talking Man* (1986), *Fire on the Mountain* (1988), *Voyage to the Red Planet* (1990), *Pirates of the Universe* (1996), and *The Pickup Artist* (2001). His 1990 short story “Bears Discover Fire” won both the Hugo and the Nebula awards, and his all-dialogue story “They're Made Out of Meat” is one of the most widely-reprinted SF stories of the last several decades. He has published several volumes of short fiction, including *Bears Discover Fire and Other Stories* (1993), *In the Upper Room and Other Likely Stories* (2000), and *Greetings* (2005).





## About the Author

**Elizabeth Hand** was born March 29, 1957 and grew up in New York. She studied drama and anthropology at The Catholic University of America. She is the bestselling author of thirteen genre-spanning novels and four collections of short fiction. Her books and short fiction have been translated into numerous languages and have been optioned for film and television.



# About the Type

Garamond is a group of many serif typefaces, named for sixteenth-century Parisian engraver Claude Garamond, generally spelled as Garamont in his lifetime. Garamond-style typefaces are popular and particularly often used for book printing and body text.

Garamond's types followed the model of an influential typeface cut for Venetian printer Aldus Manutius by his punchcutter Francesco Griffo in 1495, and are in what is now called the old-style of serif letter design, letters with a relatively organic structure resembling handwriting with a pen, but with a slightly more structured, upright design.